

桜庭一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

# GOSICKS

—ゴシックエス— 春來たる死神

角川ビーンズ文庫



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等身大に近い素晴らしい人形。

漆黒のドレスは  
ベルベットのフリルで幾層にもふくらみ、  
宵闇に咲く不吉な小さな花のように  
広がっていた。

ふいに人形——いや、少女が口を開く。

「遅刻しただけでは飽きたらず、  
その上図書館でさぼるつもりかね？」





「わかったかい？」

植物園に女の子なんていないんだ。

あの人形はあつたけどね。

あれは前世紀ドイツの人形師

グラフィエンシュタインの作品さ。

彼は悪魔と取り引きして

人形に魂を込めることに成功した」

一弥は呆然とした。

——ヴィクトリカが、いない……？

そんなはずない……ヴィクトリカは……いる！







くろよろがすや  
**久城 一弥**  
極東の島国よりリンヴァール王  
国に留学してきた。心優しい  
優等生。怪物で正然に遊  
び、一人一家の三男。

#### ヴィクトリカ

書物・甘いお菓子・フリルを愛  
する、謎多き天才美少女。図書  
館塔最上階で膨大な書物を読む  
のが日課。



#### グレヴィール

地元警察署警部。  
色男だが、普段はなぜかドリル  
のような奇怪な髪型をしている。



#### アプリル・ブラッドリー

英国から学園に留学してきた怪談  
好きの美少女。  
冒険家サー・ブラッドリーの孫娘。



#### セシル先生

一弥とヴィクトリカのクラス担任教  
師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童  
顔の女性。

## CHARACTERS

ミリア・マール …八年前に病死した女生徒。  
クィアラン …大泥棒。



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By the time Rapunzel was twelve, she was the most beautiful child under the sun. The witch locked Rapunzel up in a high tower that had neither a door nor a stairway, but only a tiny little window at the very top. When the witch wanted to enter, she stood below and called out:

“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair.”

—*The Brothers Grimm, Rapunzel.*

# Prologue

*It* was contained in a small body.

So for a long time, the people of that country were unaware of *its* existence.

*It* took the form of a little girl.

So no one noticed.

The bizarre darkness sleeping deep within the layers of luxurious ruffles and laces.

A maze.

A terrifying brain that would serve as the first step in changing dark history.

*It* lived quietly inside a little girl named Victorique.

Victorique's brain was a vast, dark, bizarre and complex maze. No one could even catch a glimpse of it, let alone understand it. Victorique was like a lone king without territory or subjects, so to speak. An enormous land. Vast knowledge, and a Wellspring of Wisdom. Victorique was always bored. So she holed herself up in a library tower that reached to the heavens and read books. For a long time, no one came there.

A woman who knew her murmured, "I think bored means she's lonely."

But now a vassal was about to arrive.

The vassal was a small boy with black hair. Born in a distant foreign country, he had an unfamiliar skin color and a good-natured, yet somewhat stubborn look to his face. His name was Kazuya Kujou. He had come a long way across the sea. He climbed the library tower...

And finally met her.

The year is 1924.

Sauville. A small country situated in a corner of Europe, with a long and grand history, bordered by France, Switzerland and Italy.

If the Mediterranean coast, known as a summer getaway for the nobility, was the opulent entrance to Sauville, then the Alps were the secret attic of



the vast castle. At the foot of the mountains stood St. Marguerite Academy, a prestigious school for the children of nobility.

It was a spring day this year when a girl and a boy met.

A mysterious girl named Victorique, known as a Gray Wolf, holing up in the library tower of the school, and a foreign exchange student from a country in the Far East, Kazuya Kujou.

# Chapter 1: The Traveler Who Arrives in Spring Brings Death to the Academy

Kazuya Kujou was a serious boy.

You could say that that was his only redeeming trait. On top of that, he was hard-headed, quiet, dull, and bland.

He was the youngest among four siblings. His oldest brother was a martial arts master, the second a brilliant inventor, and his beautiful older sister was a dancer.

Although he didn't possess any unique trait, Kazuya was the most serious and had the best academic record. Thanks to that—and because he was the third son, he did not have to succeed as head of the family—his father, the patriarch, decided that it would not be a problem if he were to have an unfortunate accident in a foreign country and could not return home. And so he came to the academy in the Kingdom of Sauville, which had recently begun accepting exchange students from allied countries.

His father was a military man, and he would always tell Kazuya that as the third son of an imperial soldier, he must be this and that. Kazuya himself was always careful not to screw up. As the third son of an imperial soldier, he had to maintain a serious attitude.

“Kujou! Kujou!”

One day, a little past seven in the morning.

The usual Kazuya would wake up in his room in the boys' dormitory, wash his face, comb his hair, change into his uniform, and go downstairs to the dining hall with firm footsteps.

All the children of nobility slept until the very last minute. Kazuya would usually be up before there was any student in the dining hall. At most, the red-haired, twenty-something, sexy dorm mother, would be sitting cross-legged in a round chair, reading the morning paper with a cigarette in her mouth. Since he was an oriental, and not of noble blood, barely any



boys welcomed him. He didn't have any close friends yet. To avoid feeling lonely, he deliberately chose to be up earlier than the rest.

However, that morning...

Kazuya was in the middle of washing his face when he was startled by a woman's voice and a banging on the door. He opened the door with his uniform on.

The sexy dorm mother with fiery-red hair and a glamorous body stood there, looking drowsy.

"Good morning," Kazuya greeted. "I-Is something wrong?"

"Good. I thought you'd be awake. Go buy some cheese and ham!"

"...What?"

The dorm mother dragged Kazuya out of his room and shoved something that looked like a sandwich into the pocket of his uniform.

"Wh-Wh-What's going on?" Kazuya asked, confused. "Buy cheese and ham? Me? Where? Why?"

"More specifically, I need you to buy 500 grams of ricotta cheese and a kilo of ham. From the morning market. I forgot to go shopping yesterday."

Kazuya shoved his tie into one of his pockets. "Why?"

"I was on my way to the grocery store, when I ran into a friend who invited me to a dance party. So I danced, had some wine, and came back. Empty-handed. So go, quick! I don't have breakfast to serve everyone. I'll get fired! Hurry!"

"I meant why me?"

"Because you're an early riser. And wimpy... I-I mean compassionate. Yes, compassionate!"

The dorm mother dragged Kazuya down the stairs and mercilessly kicked him out of the dormitory.

"That sandwich is your breakfast," she said, her plump, curvy figure swaying. "I'll be boiling some water and cutting the bread. Hurry up!"

"Uh—"

The door slammed shut.

For a while, Kazuya just stared sleepily at the door. Then he sighed.

"...Okay."

Reluctantly he started for the main gate.

Ever since he was young, women always casually asked Kazuya for favors. It was his sister, he believed, that said it was a talent of his, but Kazuya didn't think so. If he carried himself with dignity, like the son of a soldier, he would not be asked to do things—or worse, run errands.

He passed through the main gate. Walking down the gravel road to the village, he sighed.

Kazuya Kujou, a quiet and straight-laced man who was extremely timid around women, had a surprising side that he had never shown to anyone. A secret that he kept even from his family and friends. Kazuya was, in fact, quite the dreamer.

Behind his serious and rigid mask, he imagined a wonderful encounter with a beautiful member of the opposite sex. He secretly believed that everyone would one day meet their own girl. In his case, she would be pretty, and they would get along well. Perfect for each other, as though God himself brought them together.

If his father were to find out that he was thinking about such things, he would not only be embarrassed, but would probably get slapped back and forth for not being manly enough.

*But somewhere out there is my girl...*

Hurrying down the road, he heaved another sigh.

*Let's say, this morning...*

He let his imagination run free.

*Maybe I bump into a cutie who's in a hurry. I would ask: "Ça va?" And she would say: "Ça va bien. Merci." When our eyes meet, she falls in love with me.*

Kazuya snapped back to reality. Shrugging, he laughed at himself for imagining such a clichéd scenario.

*That doesn't happen in real life. Anyway, gotta buy the cheese and ham quick and return to the academy. I've been studying here for six months and I've never been late. The third son of an imperial soldier is never late. Gotta move...*

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flicker of motion. A passerby, he decided. Though it was unusual for anyone to be out on the village road so early in the morning.

*So anyway, my girl...*

Quickening his pace, he dove back into his imaginary world.



*I'd prefer blonde hair. Gold is a beautiful color. Dazzling hair that's nowhere to be found back home.*

Suddenly, there was a screeching of brakes.

Kazuya had just turned a corner, thinking about blonde hair and what not, without looking ahead. There was a loud, crashing sound, followed by a hush.

Kazuya came to his senses. "...Huh?"

A shiny, German-made motorcycle had slammed into a low stone wall enclosing a vineyard. It seemed as though it failed to turn the corner and hit the wall at a very high speed. Kazuya's face turned grim as he realized that if his timing had been a little off, he could have been run over.

A large man wearing a black helmet was sitting frozen on the motorcycle, shocked perhaps from the accident. Kazuya opened his mouth to give him a piece of his mind, but he became concerned when the man remained motionless.

"Um... *Ça va?*

There was no reply. He took a closer look and saw the man's stiff face, his eyes wide open and unblinking.

*Here I was, hoping to bump into a cute girl, but instead I ran into a huge dude on a motorcycle. Lame. It can't possibly get any worse than this.*

He sighed once more.

And then things, in fact, got worse.

Something fell to the ground and rolled.

It was the man's head.

Kazuya screamed.

The man's head rolled around with its helmet still on, coming to a stop at Kazuya's feet. It was looking up at him with a frozen expression.

"*Ça va?*" he asked the head.

There was a sound, like water spraying from a fountain. Kazuya glanced up and saw blood spurting out from the base of the man's neck, painting the headless corpse and the motorcycle crimson.

Kazuya screamed again.

In the distance, the morning sun glittered, shining down on the lush vineyards. It was a pleasant morning.

*Running not into a girl, but a headless corpse...*

Kazuya knitted his brows into a deep scowl.

*I wish I'd never studied abroad.*

He let out a deep sigh...

...and fainted.

When he woke up, Kazuya found himself lying on a bed in an unfamiliar room. It was small, poorly-lit, and surrounded by medicine cabinets. Lifting his body up, he looked out the window. When he saw the expansive academy grounds, he surmised that he was in the infirmary.

A lovely soprano voice came from across the hallway.

“Wait, Inspector! This is tyranny!”

Kazuya raised his head at the familiar voice. Soon after, footsteps pattered closer, and the owner of the voice opened the door to the infirmary.

A small head appeared.

Large round glasses over droopy brown eyes. Shoulder-length brown hair. It was Kazuya's homeroom teacher, Ms. Cecile. Probably in her early twenties, she looked younger than her students. She gave the impression of an adorable puppy.

When she noticed that Kazuya was awake, the teacher smiled, and stepped inside the infirmary.

“Ah, you're awake,” Ms. Cecile said. “Thank goodness. *Ça va?*”

“Y-Yeah...”

“I was worried because you were unusually late. When I called the dormitory, the dorm mother was mumbling something.”

Kazuya remembered the cheese and ham. He wondered if the dorm mother was reprimanded for serving breakfast without any sides, but then he remembered the headless corpse, and he turned pale as a sheet.

“Then I received a call that a strange body had been found on the village road, and you were lying nearby. So I asked the villagers to bring you here. What on earth happened?”

The teacher's worried look left Kazuya flustered. As he opened his mouth to explain, there was a rattle, and the door to the infirmary opened.

Kazuya looked at the door.

And he froze.

A weird-looking, young man was standing there. Dressed in a well-tailored suit, he was tall and slim, with handsome, elegant features. Silver



cufflinks gleamed on his wrists. A fop.

But there was a part of him that was just plain weird.

His head.

The man had glistening blonde hair, which for some reason, was pointed forward in the shape of a drill. Kazuya gaped at the golden hair. The man looked at Kazuya as he struck a pose like a ballet dancer, one hand on the wall and one leg stretched out behind him.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” he said.

“...What?”

*Was I waiting for him? Who is he?*

Ms. Cecile swallowed and shot the man a sharp glare.

“I am Inspector Grevil de Blois.”

“I see...”

“I’ll be interviewing you now.”

“Oh, okay,” Kazuya agreed.

Inspector Blois snapped his fingers. Footsteps pattered down the corridor, and two young men wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps appeared. Unlike the inspector, the young men had the friendly faces of proletariats, and were dressed in cotton waistcoats and sturdy boots, the kind of clothes you’d see down at the village. They appeared to be Inspector Blois’ subordinates.

As the two pulled Kazuya out of the infirmary, he noticed something... odd.

The young subordinates were holding hands, for some reason.

Kazuya looked away.

And then looked again.

They *were* holding hands.

Kazuya gave them a weird stare.

“We’re childhood friends,” one said.

“Hahaha!”

Both men smiled broadly. Kazuya had no idea how to react.

Inspector Blois and his two odd subordinates took Kazuya to a room in the school building that was being used as a reference room.

It was a dim, creepy room. There was a light-brown globe, a huge wooden carving of some kind, seemingly from India, and a pile of bizarre

medieval weapons, stored here because they didn't know what to do with them.

The lamps burned dimly, fizzling.

Inspector Blois sat Kazuya down in a creaky, old wooden chair, and seated himself on a sturdy-looking, rectangle desk. He picked up the globe and toyed with it.

"Kazuya Kujou. Age: fifteen. Born in 1909. Excellent grades. No friends."

The inspector began uttering information about Kazuya, who hung his head low upon hearing the last part.

Back in his country, he had friends at the military academy he attended, and there were also boys in his neighborhood whom he had known since childhood. But after coming to Sauville, Kazuya could not fit in with the children of nobility; they seemed to not want anything to do with oriental people.

Inspector burst out laughing. "Ah, juvenile crime. I can't wrap my head around it. I don't like the idea of sending young, promising people to the gallows, but a crime is a crime."

"...What?" Kazuya came back to his senses.

A knot formed in his gut. He glanced toward the door and saw the inspector's subordinates standing there, feet planted firmly, as though preventing any attempts of escaping.

*Wait a minute...*

Despite his disturbing words, the inspector was staring at Kazuya with a bright smile. He then, for some reason, raised one leg and pointed at the boy. He was shaking as he tried to maintain his pose.

"Kujou, you're the culprit!"

Kazuya was dumbfounded. "You're wrong!" he denied vehemently. "I was just passing by. You can't just decide I'm the culprit like that. I object. Firmly and unequivocally. I demand a thorough investigation and an accurate reasoning. I..."

"Tsk, ts, ts." Inspector Blois waved his forefinger.

"..."

His attitude got on Kazuya's nerves. He regarded the man's finger irritably.

“I am not interested in how your mind works, Kujou,” the inspector said. “I am not interested in why a man would commit murder at a foreign school, causing a diplomatic issue.”

“D-Diplomatic issue...?”

“The victim was a government official on vacation.”

“N-No way...”

Kazuya was speechless, his face pale.

His life flashed before his eyes.

The scenery from his country, the faces of his gentle mother and strict father, the vivid sun rising above the port city where he took the ship to Sauville.

“Kujou, you’re the only one who could’ve done it.”

“That can’t be! How can you be so sure?”

Inspector Blois laughed. He raised a leg to strike another pose, when a knock came at the door.

The inspector and his two subordinates ignored it.

Another knock.

They ignored it still. The door opened. Behind the two subordinates blocking the way, Kazuya saw Ms. Cecile’s cute little face. With a smile on her face, she passed under the men’s joined hands and approached Kazuya, who was on the verge of tears.

“Here you go,” she said, presenting two sheets of paper.

Kazuya took them. They were handouts for class, used in today’s morning session. The first sheet had Kazuya’s name on it, while the other one...

...bore the name of a different boy.

Victorique.

Ms. Cecile smiled assertively. Kazuya gave her a questioning look.

“It’s the handout for class this morning,” the teacher said. “One is for you, and the other for a student who was also absent.”

“Okay...”

The name Victorique rang a bell. There was always an empty seat by the window in the classroom. In his six months here in the academy, Kazuya had never seen the student who occupied that seat attend classes.

He only knew their name. Victorique.

He'd always wondered why they never showed up to class.

"Go to your classroom now," Ms. Cecile said, still wearing the same smile. "But before you head back, I need you to deliver the handout to Victorique. Can you do that for me?"

"Sure..." Kazuya agreed.

"You're interfering with our investigation!" Inspector Blois snapped.

"With all due respect, Inspector." Ms. Cecile turned, determined to stand her ground.

Overpowered by her indomitable spirit, the inspector shut his mouth.

"If you want to arrest him, bring a warrant first," she added. "This is abuse of police authority. On behalf of the academy, I protest."

The inspector narrowed his eyes, then nodded slowly. "Under the circumstances, if I apply for a warrant today, I should get it tomorrow. We'll be back then. I understand your desire to protect your precious students, but please keep in mind many have died because of heroism throughout history."

Ms. Cecile pulled Kazuya out of the creepy room.

"Thank you so much, Teach," Kazuya said.

"No problem. Don't forget this." As they walked down the corridor, Ms. Cecile pushed a handout to Kazuya. "To the library."

"Th-The library?"

"Yes." Ms. Cecile nodded.

Apparently the underachiever and slacker Victorique was in the library for some reason. Why was she there instead of the classroom?

The empty seat by the window flashed through his mind. His classmates, staying away from it in fear.

Kazuya wondered what it was all about. He found it odd that he had not once seen the face of this Victorique.

"Top floor of the library tower," Ms. Cecile said with a smile. "That child likes heights."

"I-I see..." Kazuya hung his head.

He was a little bit hurt, feeling betrayed by his homeroom teacher. She never commended him, an honor student who always attended classes, prepared and reviewed for lessons, studied French, the official language of this country, as well as Latin for reading and understanding literature, yet she smiled as she talked about a truant.



“We have a saying in my country about smokes and high places,” Kazuya said. He was unusually upset. Due in part, perhaps, to the weird inspector striking terror in him.

“Oh, you. Couldn’t be more wrong.” Not taking the bait, Ms. Cecile chuckled. And then, she added, “That child is a genius.”

Why did she call them a genius, while completely disregarding this boy from the orient with excellent grades? Who in the world was this truant?

Kazuya was walking along the school’s gravel path with these thoughts in mind.

Wearing a long face, he headed to the library to deliver the handout anyway. Such was his straight-laced nature. The campus of the academy was designed like a luxurious French-style garden, with fountains, flowerbeds, streams, and cozy, vast lawns between them. Kazuya was walking along the white gravel path between the lawns.

He arrived at a tower that stood quietly behind the school building. St. Marguerite’s Grand Library.

Shaped in a polygonal tube, its walls were filled with huge bookshelves. At the center was a vast hall with a high ceiling adorned with majestic religious paintings. A narrow wooden staircase connected the bookshelves to each other like a gigantic maze.

Legend had it that in the early 17th century, the King, the founder of the academy, intentionally built the library like a labyrinth so that he could secretly enjoy the company of his mistress in the room at the top.

But now the building was silent, filled with the smell of dust, mold, and wisdom.

Kazuya looked up reverently. He spotted what seemed like a golden band hanging down from around the ceiling.

*What is that?*

Perplexed, he started climbing the labyrinthine stairs.

He moved from wall to wall. Little by little, he neared the ceiling. It was like walking on a tightrope. Trembling, he climbed the narrow staircase, careful not to look down.

He was getting tired. And angry. Angry that he was doing all this for a slacker. Before he knew it, he was almost at the hanging golden band.

A wisp of white smoke drifted to the ceiling.

Kazuya moved his feet cautiously.

And he found himself in a conservatory.

For some reason, there was a lush greenhouse atop the library. Soft light shone through the skylight, and the greenery swayed in the breeze. Contrary to the legends about the king, the place was bright and empty.

A large porcelain doll was lying on the space between the conservatory and the stairs.

It was a wonderful doll, nearly life-size, about 140 centimeters tall. Her jet-black dress was full of ruffles, billowing out from her waist to the hem like an ominous little flower blooming at dusk. Her long, magnificent golden hair, like an untied velvet turban, cascaded down to the floor from beneath a white headdress adorned with a ribbon lace and roses.

Possessing cold, beautiful features, it was hard to tell whether it was a child or an adult.

The expensive doll, abandoned on the landing, was expressionless, smoking its pipe languidly.

*A doll smoking a pipe?!*

Suddenly the doll—no, the girl, opened her mouth.

“Being late wasn’t enough, and now you’re skipping classes? You’re free to do what you want, of course, but at least keep your distance. I don’t want to be disturbed.”

The girl slowly closed her mouth.

Hearing her voice, husky as an old woman’s, Kazuya swallowed. It didn’t match her appearance at all. Her body, wrapped in mesmerizing frills and laces, was so small and slim that it seemed as if it had only been years since she was born, but her voice sounded old, like she had already lived for decades.

The girl, whose features were so cold and perfect that she could easily be mistaken for a doll, silently puffed on her pipe, ignoring the gaping boy.







When he finally managed to pull himself together, Kazuya said, “A-Are you Victorique, by any chance?”

There was no reply.

Nervously, he added, “If you are, I brought a handout for you.”

The girl—Victorique—silently held out her hand.

Kazuya took a few steps closer and gave her the handout. His footsteps echoed surprisingly loud in the tranquil space, and he flinched. Feeling like an uncultured intruder in this quiet paradise, he blushed.

He quietly observed her as she took the handout and returned to smoking her pipe.

*So the underachiever was a girl. And a really pretty one at that. I thought she was a doll at first. But she looks a little... no, very strange.*

Suddenly the strange girl opened her small, cherry lips. “And who might you be?”

“What?” Kazuya gave a start. He blushed a bit. “My name is Kujou. I’m in the same class as you. Though I’ve never met you before.”

“You’re an oriental?”

The girl grinned for some reason. A spine-chilling change in her cold expression. Kazuya shuddered.

“I see,” she murmured amusingly in her husky voice. “So you’re the Springtime Reaper.”

“...What?” Kazuya blurted. It was an odd, unfamiliar word.

The girl smirked. “You didn’t know, did you? It’s one of those silly horror stories rampant in this musty, superstition-ridden school. A traveler arrives in the spring, bringing death to the academy. For some reason, the students here love horror stories. And you are perfect material. But no one dares get close to you because of fear.”

Kazuya stood there speechless. It felt like a hole just opened in his heart.

Images flashed through his mind: himself alone in the classroom, children of nobility talking secretly in the distance, the boy sitting nearby who ran away when he spoke to him.

In his six months studying abroad, he always wondered why he couldn’t get close to anyone. He never realized that it was because of such superstitions.

“That can’t be right,” he protested, irked. “I arrived six months ago. In fall. So that’s just weird.”

The girl sneered. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Well, I doubt the students care about the details. A quiet, black-haired, oriental guy fits the image of the Grim Reaper."

The girl did not even spare so much as a glance at Kazuya as he stood there blankly. Her face remained cold.

Kazuya stared at her face for a while. She looked ruthless, indifferent, and cold. It was a face he'd seen countless times since he came to Sauville. The arrogant attitude characteristic of the nobility.

Kazuya felt both nervous and repulsed at her. His ill feelings toward the aristocratic society that caused him so much hardship boiled within him.

He turned and started down the labyrinthine stairs.

After taking a few steps, a thought came to him.

He turned back around. "Uh... Victorique," he called softly.

"What is it?" She sounded annoyed.

"How did you know I was late?"

The girl smirked. "Elementary. The Wellspring of Wisdom told me."

"What do you mean?"

"Allow me to explain," Victorique raised her husky, smug voice. "I'm guessing you're a methodical, overly-serious, dull man."

"G-Get off my case!"

"But what happened to your necktie? Instead of being tied around your neck, it's in your pocket. I caught a glimpse of it. So I deduced that you probably left the dorm in a hurry."

Kazuya's hand went to his neck. She was right. He wasn't wearing his tie today. He had no time to tie it properly, so he shoved it into his pocket.

"And your smell," she added.

"What? Do I smell?"

"Yes. The savory smell of bread. Why would you be carrying around bread when it's too early for lunch? Check your pocket."

Kazuya put his hand in his other pocket. It contained a sandwich that the dorm mother shoved in when he left the dormitory. Though it had been squashed flat, it looked quite tasty nonetheless.

"The breakfast you were supposed to eat is inside. Hence, I can deduce that you were late. That's all. Did you follow?"

Victorique yawned, seemingly bored, and stretched in the manner of kittens. Her small body extended surprisingly long. Small tears formed at the corners of her eyes. She then returned to smoking her pipe languidly.

But when she noticed Kazuya watching her curiously, like she was some sort of unfamiliar creature, she shrugged and reluctantly spoke.

“It’s too much trouble, but fine, I’ll explain it to you.”

“Okay.”

“I sharpen my senses.”

“...What?”

“And my Wellspring of Wisdom toys with fragments I receive from the chaos in this world to stave off my boredom.”

“Chaos? Fragments? Wellspring of Wisdom?”

“Yes. Would it be easier to understand if I call it ‘reconstruction’?”

“...Reconstruction?”

“Sometimes, when I feel like it, I will verbalize it so that even a simpleton like you can understand.”

“...”

“Ah, I can’t believe I spent all that effort to explain. I hope that was enough.”

Kazuya was silent, completely lost. He was a little peeved.

*What’s with her attitude? I have no idea what she’s on about. I mean, sure, her deduction was correct. I hate to admit it, but this Wellspring of Wisdom thingy is quite brilliant. But still...*

Kazuya was getting more and more frustrated. He could no longer stand the girl’s condescending attitude. Besides, she was a low achiever who didn’t even show up for class.

“What about you, though?” he snapped back. “You’re late too, and you’re skipping classes. You don’t get to mock me.”

Victorique snorted. “Wrong.”

“Which part did I get wrong, then?”

“I’m not late. I’ve been here all morning.”

Kazuya frowned. “Seriously? What were you doing here all alone?”

“Contemplating.”

Kazuya took a step up the stairs.

It was at this point that Kazuya finally noticed the bizarre scene all over the floor of the conservatory where Victorique was seated.

Several books lay open in a circle around her. Latin, higher mathematics, classical literature, biology—all complex subjects. Kazuya swallowed.

*Is she reading all these books at once? Now that I think about it, she was occasionally reaching for something while talking to me. She must have been turning the pages. She was reading while sharing her deduction to me.*

A chill ran down his spine.

Ms. Cecile's sweet voice replayed in his mind.

***"That child is a genius."***

For a while, Kazuya stared in amazement at the girl reading difficult books with a bored look on her face.

Somehow, he felt the urge to fight back. He wanted to surprise this standoffish, smart, but strange girl.

"I bet you don't know I'm late, do you?" he said.

There was a momentary pause. Then for the first time, Victorique lifted her head.

Kazuya's heart almost stopped.

Large, emerald green eyes gazed at him. They looked like gems, glistening mysteriously in an empty corner of the conservatory. The contrast with the girl's long and bright, golden hair tugged at Kazuya's heart.

And then there was the inexplicable expression on her face, sorrowful, like an old lady who had lived too long.

*So pretty!*

Unexpectedly moved, Kazuya, for some reason, became even more angry.

He pulled himself together, took a deep breath, and said, "It was because of a murder case."

Victorique's pipe fell from her mouth onto her luxurious ruffled skirt.

Kazuya quickly picked it up. Inspecting for any spilled ashes, he dusted off her skirt. Victorique opened her lips a little and puckered it, as though telling him to place it there, and so he did, gently. For a while, Victorique studied Kazuya suspiciously as he attended to her with such diligence.

Then she reached for her pipe, pulled it away from her mouth, and said, "Is that so?"

Frowning, Kazuya casually sat next to her. "Is that all you have to say?!"

"I expected nothing less from the Reaper. There. Better?"



“...”

A moment later, Kazuya regained his composure. “For the record, I had a really rough morning. I’m a witness to a murder, and this inspector with a weird hairdo is treating me like a criminal!”

“An inspector with a weird hairdo?”

The agitated Kazuya failed to notice Victorique making an odd face.

“I might actually get tried as a murderer,” he continued. “I don’t want to be hanged in a foreign land. Or maybe I’ll get deported back to my country. Man, after all the effort I spent in my studies these past six months. Why did this happen? Darn it.”

“An inspector with a weird hairdo, you said?”

Kazuya glanced up. “I did.” He nodded dubiously.

Victorique flashed a devilish grin. She took a deep puff from her pipe and exhaled.

White smoke rose to the skylight.

Then she turned to Kazuya, showing interest for once. “Speak. I will reconstruct the fragments of chaos for you.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying that I’ll use my Wellspring of Wisdom for you,” she growled.

“...Why?” Perplexed, Kazuya eyed the petite, beautiful girl suspiciously.

“To stave off my boredom,” she replied flatly.

Kazuya was compelled to explain the incident to her. He was feeling dejected, his excitement gone.

“Recount to me everything you said and thought in detail,” Victorique said, “down to the state of your rectum at the time.”

“N-No way! I have to tell you what I was thinking too? A gentleman should be allowed to have a couple of playful secrets.”

“If you’re a gentleman, then I’m a god. Stop your stupid, futile, pointless resistance and talk!”

Kazuya was flabbergasted. His brain stopped working, and he couldn’t say anything back. He had never had a woman speak to him with such a sharp tongue, and so imperiously at that. In his home country, women were much more quiet and reserved.

And so Kazuya ended up telling her what went on his mind back then, including his fantasies about having his own girl and his hopes for a wonderful encounter, things he had never shared to anyone ever, until now. Kazuya hugged his knees, feeling down in the dumps. His spirit was sucked out of him, as his father would put it.

“I see. I get it.” Victorique nodded with satisfaction, oblivious of Kazuya’s state of mind. She smoked her pipe. “That inspector with the weird hairdo has a point.”

Kazuya snapped back to his senses, regaining a little bit of spirit. “What are you saying?! I swear I—”

“Silence.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

“Think about it. It’s impossible to jump onto a running motorcycle and cut off the rider’s head. Nor would it be possible to jump off quickly after committing the crime. When the motorcycle slammed onto the fence, there was no one else around but you.”

Kazuya nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. There was definitely no one else there.”

“So when was it possible to commit the crime?”

“Let’s see...”

“It would have been after the motorcycle stopped. And you were the only one there at the time, Kujou. In other words...”

Butterflies fluttered in Kazuya’s stomach. He recalled the time when Inspector Blois pointed at him in that eerie room of globes and medieval weapons.

And Victorique, like the inspector, pointed at Kazuya with her pipe, and said, “You’re the culprit.” She stared at Kazuya as he fell silent and on the verge of tears. Then she smiled devilishly. “Wouldn’t that be amusing, though?”

“You were messing with me?!” Kazuya flared, rising to his feet.

Victorique’s face abruptly turned serious, and she looked up at Kazuya. “I believe the inspector suspects you of the murder for the same reason,” she said in a husky voice. “Which means that sooner or later, if they don’t find the real killer and your innocence is not proven, you’ll be deported at best, and hanged in this country at worst. Sounds horrifying, doesn’t it?”

Kazuya turned as pale as a ghost. He sank down to the floor, clutching his head.

The faces of his father, mother, family members, and friends he had left behind, as well as the scenery in his hometown, began flashing through his mind.

Victorique glanced at him, then turned back to her books and resumed flipping the pages, as though nothing had happened.

“I know what really happened, though,” she mumbled with a yawn, puffing on her pipe.

The spring sun shining through the skylight provided warmth to the conservatory. A fresh breeze blew in from time to time, rustling the palm leaves, the large red flowers, and Victorique’s golden hair.

Several seconds passed.

Kazuya slowly raised his head. “Did you say you know what really happened?”

Victorique said nothing. Kazuya peered closer, and found her absorbed in reading as if she had already forgotten about him. She was turning pages at great speed.

“Hello?”

“...Hmm?” Victorique glanced up, and came to her senses. She nodded dispassionately. “Of course. The word ‘clueless’ is not in my dictionary. I know everything. What about what I said?”

Kazuya stamped his feet. “If you know, then tell me!”

“Hmm?” Victorique looked puzzled. “Why?” she asked curiously.

For the next few minutes, Kazuya, tearful and enraged, uttered every word he could possibly use to beg Victorique to explain.

All the while, Victorique ignored him completely, until eventually she gave in, and lifted her eyes from the books.

“By the way,” she said.

“Yes, yes.”

“My worst enemy is boredom.”

“Uh... what?”

“The same applies to food,” she added smugly. “If you’re going to eat mediocre food, it’s better to just stay hungry. Isn’t that the very reason we have intellect?”

“Uh...”

Annoyed that Kazuya wasn't quite getting it, Victorique leaned closer to him. "Bring me food from your country tomorrow."

"Why? Does it help with your reasoning?"

"Of course not. It's just food." Victorique snickered. "Here's the thing. If the food you bring is rare, delicious, and suits my palate, then maybe I'll help you."

"Whaaat?!" Kazuya cried. "Don't you, like, have compassion, or something?!"

"Compassion?" Victorique snorted. "What's that? Compassion is the death of intelligence." She shooed Kazuya away with her small hand.

Kazuya tottered out of the library. The riveted, leather door slammed shut behind him.

As he stood dazed on the grass, two men wearing hunting caps came skipping along the gravel path toward him. Inspector Grevil de Blois's men. Holding each other's hands, they passed by Kazuya, but then out of curiosity, came skipping backward toward him.

"Kujou. Feeling down?"

"Yeah," Kazuya said firmly.

The men exchanged glances and laughed.

"Um, am I really getting arrested?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow," they said clearly and decisively. Kazuya buried his head in his hands. "There's no other suspects besides you."

"Besides, we can't defy Inspector Blois."

"What does that mean?"

They exchanged looks.

"Hmm.... Actually, he didn't graduate from the police academy. He's the son of some noble. He wanted to do police work, so he was given a post at the village's police station."

"We're his chaperones, but he can be a little pushy."

"Nobles, am I right?"

It was shocking news to Kazuya.

"But you know," one of them added, "he can sometimes determine who the culprit is. He says weird things at first, then the next day, he suddenly gives brilliant deductions like he's a completely different person."

"Yup," the other agreed. "Maybe he's a genius."



“Hahaha!”

The men skipped away, laughing merrily. Kazuya watched them go, mouth hanging open, then sighed when he remembered the trouble he was in.

*Argh, to hell with nobles and geniuses!*

He walked away grumpily.

Clouds hid the sun a little, making it chilly. The wind also felt cold. The path back to the dormitory was so quiet that it felt as if there was no one else in the school but Kazuya.

He had to go back to his room and dig through the package that his family sent. He had to find food that would please the princess.

The next morning, the sky was filled with nothing but ominous gray clouds that made yesterday’s fine weather seem implausible.

Shortly after seven in the morning, someone knocked on Kazuya’s room in the boys’ dormitory. He had just finished washing his face and combing his hair. Putting on his tie, Kazuya opened the door, and saw the dorm mother looking worried, her red hair swaying.

“Kujou!” she cried. “I heard you got in some serious trouble yesterday. I’m sorry. It’s my fault for asking you to run that errand.”

“It’s all right. How was breakfast yesterday?”

“I got an earful.” The dorm mother hung her head.

Kazuya held something in front of her mouth. It was a bag full of small pink, orange, and yellow balls that she had never seen before.

The dorm mother sniffed the bag. “What is this?”

“Snacks. What do you think?”

“What do I think? It looks delicious.”

“Great. I’ll bring this one, then.” Kazuya nodded in relief.

Before the door closed, the dorm mother glanced around the room, and frowned curiously. Kazuya’s room, belonging to a neat and tidy honor student, was cluttered with piles of stuff that he had apparently taken out.

*What in the world is he up to?* The dorm mother wondered as she walked away.

Kazuya went to class carefully carrying a bag of sweets in his hands. After searching through the packages sent by his family all night, he finally

found some snacks that he thought girls would like. He walked under the cloudy sky toward the majestic, U-shaped school building. As he entered the classroom, the children of aristocracy, as usual, kept their distance, stealing glances at him.

Kazuya stared at the empty seat by the window, unconcerned. There was no sign of her coming to class today either.

*Yeah, I thought so. I guess I'll have to go to the library during lunch break.*

Suddenly, he heard a man and a woman's voice coming from down the hallway, arguing.

"This is tyranny!" the woman yelled.

The man laughed. "Aha! But I brought an arrest warrant with me today. For the murder of a government official by an exchange student. This will definitely cause a diplomatic issue."

Kazuya jumped to his feet. Inspector Blois had arrived sooner than he had expected. And he actually brought a warrant of arrest.

With the bag of candy in his arms, Kazuya opened the classroom window. Closing his eyes, he jumped out, ignoring the students' clamoring. Being an earnest and straight-laced person, this was, of course, the first time in his life that he had ever left a classroom by any exit other than the door.

Feeling quite shaken, he landed and rolled across the lawn.

*Ouch!*

He heard murmurs from the classroom overhead. Words that seemed to pour salt all over his wounds.

"The Reaper has escaped!"

Kazuya glared at the classroom.

*Damn it. They really do call me the Reaper behind my back!*

Kazuya scrambled into the large library and ran up the labyrinthine stairs.

Solemn religious paintings were staring down on Kazuya from high above. And today, too, a golden band of some sorts was hanging down from the railing, swaying invitingly from time to time in the breeze.

"Victorique!" he called.

When Kazuya arrived at the conservatory, he found Victorique looking exactly as she did yesterday, surrounded by plants and boredly skimming

through books spread in a circle around her. He ran up to her, panting hard.

Victorique lifted her head. “Oh, you’re back,” she mumbled, puffing on her pipe languidly. “You must feel lonely not having any friends.”

“It’s not funny.”

Kazuya sat down on the spot, dejected. “Anyway, remember yesterday? You promised me.”

“What did I say again?”

“Your reasoning! You said you’d tell me the truth behind the murder!”

Victorique gaped at Kazuya for a moment, then nodded when she finally remembered. She held out her small hand.

Kazuya sighed and placed the bag of snacks in her palm. Victorique opened the bag with surprising glee.

She chewed on one. “What is this?”

“They’re sweet rice crackers.”

“A curious flavor.”

“...”

She chewed.

“...”

And chewed.

“Um... hello?”

Victorique ate the exotic food with the adorable motion of a critter. She seemed to be very interested in the food’s shape and unusual taste. She grabbed one with her tiny hand, popped it in her mouth, and chewed. She did this repeatedly.

Kazuya waited impatiently for Victorique to remember him.



He was getting worried now.

*Why am I putting my hopes on this girl? Now that I think about it, I don't even know who she is, or if she even knows the truth of the case. What if she just said that because she wanted food?*

Far down in the hall, footsteps entered. Kazuya glanced down, and jumped.

He saw a golden pointy head. Inspector Blois. He saw Kazuya too, and hurried deeper inside. There was a hydraulic elevator that only faculty and staff were allowed to use.

*Clang.*

There was a rattle, and the steel cage rose higher and higher.

Kazuya was on the verge of tears. "It's gonna be a diplomatic issue!" he shouted.

Victorique stopped her hand and glanced at Kazuya. He was shaking.

"My father will kill me!" he cried. "No, I'm gonna get hanged before he even gets his hands on me! I'm gonna die in a foreign land! Nooo!"

Victorique's mouth dropped. She stared wearily at Kazuya for a while.

"The Reaper's crying," she murmured with a devilish grin.

Kazuya turned around. "Leave me alone!"

"I'm joking."

"Joking?! A person's life is at stake here! There are some things you just can't joke about... Why are you smiling? Wipe that grin off your face!"

The more Kazuya grumbled, the wider Victorique's grin became.

"Relax," she said.

"Relax? You want me to relax in this situation?! Why? What good would that do? I'd rather start running. Run as far as I can!"

Kazuya's face turned redder with each moan.

The steel cage was coming up.

Victorique stopped smiling. "You're too loud," she said with exasperation. "Fine. I'll explain it right now."

"Hurry up, then!" Kazuya stamped his feet.

Nonchalantly smoking her pipe, Victorique said, "Listen closely. You don't have to be on the motorcycle or anywhere near it to decapitate its rider."

"Why?" Kazuya sobbed.

"Because the rider provides all the speed you need."

Another sob. “What do you mean?”

Composure returned to Kazuya’s face. His innate diligence emerged, and he sat up straight, trying to understand Victorique’s explanation.

Victorique stretched out her slender arms to her sides. “What do you think would happen if you place a wire or something in the motorcycle’s path? In an empty street, where the rider is sure to pass through. As the motorcycle passes it at high speed, the wire will decapitate the rider. All the culprit has to do is retrieve the wire and leave.”

Kazuya gaped at Victorique. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and took a deep breath. “I-I see...”

“Ahuh.”

“But, uh... what about proof?”

Victorique calmly puffed her pipe. “There’s a possibility that the culprit was forced to flee the scene because you were around and started screaming. No one’s supposed to be out there so early in the morning. Perhaps the culprit failed to retrieve the wire.”

The steel cage screeched, and after an ominous silence, stopped with a loud clang.

The iron door opened.

Beyond the overgrown greenery, an inspector with a strange, drill-shaped hair was striking a pose.

But when Inspector Blois saw Victorique and Kazuya face-to-face in the conservatory, his eyes widened in astonishment.

*Huh?*

Kazuya noticed the change in the inspector’s expression.

*Does he know Victorique?*

He glanced at Victorique. Ignoring the inspector, she looked away and buried her face in her books.

*Hmm?*

A moment later, the inspector, regaining his composure, turned his attention to Kazuya. He was holding a bundle of bloody wires. Raising one leg, he held it toward Kazuya, and laughed.

“I’ve got the proof right here!”

Inspector Blois’s voice echoed through the quiet conservatory.

“We found it near the scene of the crime! It was wrapped tightly around a roadside tree. Hmm... I’m not sure what it’s for, but it must’ve been your



doing! You're under arrest, international murderer!"

Kazuya smiled broadly, and looked at Victorique.

"Explain it to him, Victorique. Tell this inspector your reasoning."

No answer.

Victorique turned around and looked at him with her mouth full of rice crackers. She shrugged, as if to say she didn't want to, then turned her gaze back to the books.

"Uh... Victorique?"

Inspector Blois approached slowly.

"You've got the wrong guy!" Kazuya protested, trembling. "Listen to me, Inspector!"

While Kazuya was explaining the wire on his own, pleading his innocence, Victorique was studying the bloody wire with great interest, flipping it around.

It took quite a while before Kazuya managed to convince the inspector and free himself from the list of suspects. He sat back down, completely exhausted.

Victorique raised her head. "Grevil."

The inspector's cheeks twitched. "Wh-What is it?"

Noticing the change in his expression, Kazuya observed Inspector Blois.

For some reason, the inspector's face was contorted in fear. He was extremely scared of the frilly Victorique, as if she were a powerful being.

It was an odd scene; it seemed like the position of adult and child had switched.

The inspector opened his quivering lips. "I-I'm never asking for your help ever again!"

Victorique snickered. "Suit yourself."

"So you two know each other," Kazuya said.

Neither of them answered. He sighed.

Inspector Blois raised his shoulders and entered the steel cage. The bars closed.

A wind blew through the skylight, rustling the palm leaves.

"The real culprit is a blonde girl," Victorique said softly. "Her fingers are injured."

The inspector whirled around with a curious look on his face. "What?"

“Check the hospital, Grevil.”

The inspector’s confused face disappeared as the steel cage descended.

As the inspector vanished into the distance, Victorique returned to languidly puffing on her pipe, seemingly losing interest in everything around her. She began turning the pages of her books as though nothing had happened.

Kazuya, who had been staring blankly into space, finally came back to his senses.

“Victorique,” he called.

“...”

“Hello? What was that just now?”

“...Hmm?” Victorique lifted her gaze. “The result of contemplation,” she said wearily. “The Wellspring of Wisdom told me so.”

Silence descended.

Victorique looked up, succumbing to Kazuya’s persistent gaze. “Think about it,” she said tediously. “Why did the culprit use such an elaborate method of killing? There are so many quick and easy ways to kill someone, like stabbing, beating, or shooting.”

“I-I don’t know...”

“Because they were scared of the victim.” Victorique snacked on a rice cracker. “The culprit is either a woman or a child. The victim was an adult male, right? The killer was afraid to confront the victim directly, so they killed him remotely. So we can assume that they were significantly of smaller physique than the victim.”

“What about their hands being injured?”

“I examined the wire and found that in addition to the blood from the victim, there were small bloodstains near the ends. It was the killer’s blood. Perhaps they inadvertently cut their fingers when they were setting up the wire or trying to remove it.”

Kazuya reached for a rice cracker. Savoring the nostalgic taste, he asked, “What about them being blonde?”

“I inferred that one from your embarrassing fantasies.”

Kazuya jumped. He had swallowed a rice cracker whole.

“Humans are creatures that respond to visual stimuli,” Victorique said coolly, paying no heed to Kazuya’s discomposure. “Your daydreams begin

by association with something that comes into your view. Do you understand?”

“I-I guess...?”

“Now, then. Why were you feeling horny when you were in a hurry, running an errand for the dorm mother?”

Kazuya blushed. “C-Can you not say ‘horny’?”

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth. A wisp of white smoke wafted toward the skylight.

She then verbalized the last fragment. “While you were walking along the empty village road, you spotted a girl out of the corner of your eye. A pretty one, probably blonde. This led to your daydreaming. You unconsciously saw the culprit.”

### **“Motorcycle Decapitation Case Solved!**

### **Inspect Blois Receives a Special Award for his Brilliant Work!”**

The next morning.

As usual, Kazuya woke up earlier than the other boys, went down to the dining hall, greeted the dorm mother, and started on his breakfast.

As a token of apology, the dorm mother served Kazuya the finest ham. She then sat down on a round chair, crossed her legs, and began reading the morning paper with a cigarette in her mouth, as she always did.

Kazuya shot her a glance, and when he saw the headline, he jumped to his feet. He borrowed the paper from the dorm mother and read it thoroughly.

“The suspect, arrested in a hospital by Inspector Blois was, surprisingly, a pretty blonde girl! Her motive is currently unknown. On a related note, the Inspector is finally conferred a special award by the Sauville police department for his speedy resolution of the case...”

The article was accompanied by a photograph of the arrested culprit, hanging her head.

Kazuya studied the girl’s hand. Her fingers were wrapped in a bandage.

*So Victorique was right...*

What kind of relationship did she have with that credit-stealing inspector?

Kazuya had so many questions. But the girl, who had solved the mystery with her brilliant mind, was the biggest and strangest mystery of them all.

Today's weather was completely different from yesterday's, with the sun shining brightly above. Kazuya put on his school cap, straightened his back, and started walking toward the school building.

He entered the classroom and went straight to his seat without talking to anyone, as he had been doing for the past six months. But he did something new, unconsciously.

He turned his gaze to the empty seat by the window.

He thought about the mysterious girl who was supposed to be in that seat but was not around.

A small smile appeared on his lips.

*I now know about the student in that seat. She... That mysterious creature is no doubt in the library's conservatory right now, enjoying a chaotic tryst with her Wellspring of Wisdom and the books around her. Victorique... you're such a weirdo!*

Kazuya chuckled.

*I should bring her some unusual snacks again. She seemed to like the rice crackers. She was stuffing her mouth like a squirrel gobbling on nuts.*

The bell rang.

Ms. Cecile entered the classroom. It was the usual scene.

Then, a tall girl stepped inside after her.

She had a perfect slim figure. Her rich, blonde hair was cut in short curls that emphasized her elegant face. She had distinctly beautiful features, noticeable even from afar.

Ms. Cecile smiled. "I would like to introduce a student from England. Ms. Avril Bradley. Be nice to her, okay?"

The girl smiled, inclining her head a little.

Ms. Cecile looked around. "As for your seat... There's a vacant one next to Kujou."

Kazuya, who had been staring vacantly at the girl, nodded. Their gazes met. Avril flashed him a cordial smile, which made Kazuya turn red, a little embarrassed.

Avril walked to her seat with graceful steps, as if she were dancing on a cloud. She placed her bag on the desk, and was about to sit down, when she dropped her bag on the floor.

Being an earnest person by nature, Kazuya picked up the bag. Avril gave him a curious look.

“*Ca va?*” Kazuya asked.

“*Ca va. Merci.*”

Avril smiled as she took the bag. It was a charming smile, like a flower blooming.

Kazuya froze. He had fantasized about this encounter. Smiling, Avril took her eyes off Kazuya and turned to the blackboard.

But there was something...

Kazuya's eyes went from her face to her hands on the table, and he spotted something shocking. The thumb and index finger of her right hand were wrapped in bandages. She was injured.

*N-No way...!*

Kazuya swallowed.

Victorique's husky voice replayed in his mind.

***“The real culprit is a blonde girl. Her fingers are injured.”***

Kazuya jumped to his feet. Startled at the sound, Ms. Cecile and his classmates all stared at him. He quickly sat back down, dropping his head into his hands.

A blonde girl.

With injuries on her fingers.

Avril Bradley, an exchange student from England, fit both descriptions.

*No way. It's gotta be a coincidence. They already arrested the culprit. She must've been injured by something else. Yes, just a coincidence...*

A warm spring breeze blew in from the window. The girls' long hairs and the hem of their skirts swayed softly.

*Right. It's spring now...*

*A traveler arrives in spring, bringing death to the academy!*

Noticing Kazuya's gaze, the blonde girl with the bandaged fingers turned to him. When she saw the look of suspicion in his eyes, she shot him a brief, terrifying glare. It almost seemed like she was a different person from moments ago.

*Is she really just an exchange student? No, there's something about her...*

Kazuya held her gaze. Avril looked away first.

Kazuya Kujou, the third son of an imperial soldier who had come to Sauville from a country in the Far East, and Victorique, a mysterious girl buried in difficult books under tropical trees on the top floor of the library tower. As the two meet and become friends, the academy's secrets are unraveled one after another.

First, they would embark on a journey of mystery and adventure that involved a mysterious foreign exchange student, Avril Bradley, and a purple book containing dubious magic.

But that is a story for another day...



## **Chapter 2: Dreadful Things Occur on the Staircase's Thirteenth Step**

Darkness.

The air was dry.

A bundle of primroses, moist with night dew as if they had just been plucked from the field, swayed in the darkness.

Holding it to his chest was a young man, dressed in the clothes of a medieval knight, breathing softly.

A voice sounded, quiet as a sigh.

“I... will... be...”

The voice grew quieter.

“...with... you... forever...”

The primroses lost their luster and wilted away, as though the voice had sucked the life out of them.

In a dark, locked space, the knight lay motionless, holding a bundle of flowers and breathing quietly.

There was no other sound.

A moment later, the voice came again.

“I will be with you forever.”

Several years later...

A beautiful spring afternoon.

St. Marguerite's Grand Library.

A tube-shaped tower soaring high into the sky. A spacious hall with a high ceiling, with huge bookshelves covering the walls. A slightly humid air that could only be described as smelling of books.

It was one of the proud structures of St. Marguerite Academy, a prestigious school built deep in the mountains of the Kingdom of Sauville, also known as the Little Giant of Western Europe. It was said that the then-

king intentionally built the high, winding stairs to be a labyrinth for his trysts with his mistress.

Near the ceiling of the large library was a curious conservatory, lush and green, illuminated by the light pouring in through the skylight.

As with any other day, a wisp of white smoke was rising from a white ceramic pipe. A girl was narrowing her emerald eyes at the smoke, lost in thought. Petite in figure, she looked so beautiful that she could have been mistaken for a doll.

Her long, magnificent blonde hair cascaded to the floor like an untied velvet turban, and a pink braided ribbon hung down from her tiny back like a folded bird's feather. A thick book lay open on her knees, over a luxurious dress, puffed up with layers of white lace.

Books were spread open around the girl in a circle, with pink marshmallows scattered among them, for some reason.

The girl suddenly shifted.

The riveted leather door of the library flung open, and someone entered.

Looking down from between the railings, the girl furrowed her brows faintly.

Her pale green eyes were impossible to read; she seemed both an innocent child and an old woman who had lived far too long. Leaning her small body against the railing, she peered downstairs, but the expression on her miraculously handsome features was as still as a cold doll, tinged by ennui.

Meanwhile, the visitor...

"I really don't want to see her... What do I do?"

They were standing in the hall of the library, grumbling.

Kazuya Kujou. Fifteen years old. A boy from a country in the Far East who, thanks to his excellent scholastic standing, was invited to study in Sauville. He had had a difficult time making friends over the past six months because of a popular horror story among the students about a traveler coming in spring and bringing death to the academy. Thus he had been nicknamed the 'Reaper'.

Just three days ago, when he became inadvertently involved in a murder case, he met a mysterious girl (actually a classmate of his, but she had never attended classes, instead spending her time in the library) who lived on top

of this library. She used her intellect—her Wellspring of Wisdom, she called it—to save him from his predicament.

“Hmm... I’d really like her opinion about something. But I don’t really know her that well, and she’s kind of scary. She might not even like me.” Kazuya sneezed.

Although it was spring already, the wind still carried with it the chill of winter. As he sniffled, something fell down from the top.

A white, feather-like object.

It was a tissue paper.

Kazuya took it and blew his nose. He stared at the paper for a while, deep in thought, and when he realized that the person above must have dropped it, his eyes first widened in surprise, and then he smiled. He looked up.

“Victorique!” he called. “It’s me, Kujou!”

He cheerfully ran up the labyrinthine stairs.

Several minutes later...

Panting hard, Kazuya placed a hand on the railing, exhausted from climbing the long flight of stairs.

“Hi, Victorique,” he greeted the girl smoking a pipe. “Thanks for the tissue.”

“...”

Victorique did not reply; her face was buried in a book.

Kazuya sat down beside her. “Also, thanks for the help the other day.”

“...”

“So, uh... I actually need your opinion on something.”

“...”

“Hello? Are you listening?”

There was no word from her for a while. Her doll-like face conveyed only a detached coldness. Kazuya waited impatiently for a reply.

“Don’t get too friendly with me,” she said icily. “It’s annoying.”

“Wh-Why not?!” Kazuya snapped, his anger flaring.

“You’re the Reaper, aren’t you?”

“R-Right! About that!”

Startled by Kazuya’s loud voice, Victorique’s eyes, still fixed on the book, widened slightly. The cold expression on her face, veiled with ennui,

lit up a little.

“I’m *not* the Reaper. It’s her!”

“...Who?”

“Her name is Avril Bradley. An exchange student from England. She seems to be an ordinary cute girl at first glance, but she actually has a secret...”

Victorique held out a hand, still not looking at him.

“Hmm? What’s with your hand?” Kazuya stared curiously at her palm, small as a child’s. “What is it?”

She did not answer. She only waved her hand repeatedly.

“Tsk. I get it. Unusual food, right?”

This girl, whose favorite phrase was ‘boredom is my worst enemy’, would not listen to what Kazuya had to say unless he offered her some exotic food that would keep her occupied. So before heading to the library, Kazuya returned to the dormitory and rummaged through the packages he received from home, searching for some rare snacks that lasted a long time.

While the earnest side of him wondered if this would be considered bribery, Kazuya took out a small bag he had brought with him.

“Here you go,” he said. “These are snacks my sister sent me. It’s called *kaminari-okoshi*.”

For the first time today, Victorique lifted her head. Placing the book on the floor, she put her hand inside the bag curiously.

Like a critter carrying food in its arms, she happily stuffed the snack in her mouth.

She chewed. “Why is it so outrageously hard? Is this a delicacy?”

“No idea. So, anyway...” Kazuya peered into her face.

Victorique sighed. “Fine. If you want to talk about it so badly, go ahead.”

That morning, Kazuya left the boys’ dormitory at the usual time and, keeping his back straight, headed for the school building.

It was a fine morning. The sweet fragrance of flowers wafted in from the colorful flowerbeds on the campus that resembled a French-style garden. Kazuya, who usually walked at a brisk pace, slowed down that morning, unknowingly, and gazed at the flowerbeds and green trees.

“Hmm? Uh, you’re the guy sitting next to me. Kujou, right?”

When he reached the front of the school building, a girl called to him. He turned around and saw a familiar girl standing there. She had short blond hair and slender arms and legs. She was a beautiful, lively-looking girl.

Avril Bradley, a classmate who just recently came from England as an exchange student.

“Wanna head to the classroom together?” she said.

Avril walked alongside Kazuya, oblivious to his shy nature. There was a refreshing smile on her distinct, mature features.

“I heard you’re also an exchange student,” she said.

“Y-Yeah...” Kazuya nodded, a little nervous.

Walking side by side, he realized that Avril had quite the large build. She was just as tall as Kazuya, a boy, and had a solid physique more reminiscent of a grown woman than a young girl.

Kazuya wondered if she was really fifteen years old. Avril continued talking cheerfully. She did not seem to care about him being quiet.

“Don’t you think this school’s kinda weird?” she said. “It’s old, so are the buildings, the gardens, and the dorms. The school I went to in England was modern, so this is very new to me. Hey, did you know there are lots of horror stories here?”

“Are you talking about the Springtime Reaper?”

“What’s that? What I heard was something about not stopping at the thirteenth step of a staircase. Apparently a teacher who hanged himself on the thirteenth step will drag you to the afterlife.” Avril laughed heartily.

“Ghosts are not real. Imagine believing in that sort of thing.”

Apparently, this foreign student was not a believer in horror stories and superstitions.

“But it’s kind of fascinating, isn’t it? It got me excited. I thought: Avril’s adventure is about to begin! You see, my grandfather was an adventurer. Do you know Sir Bradley? He drove a jeep to Africa and rode a balloon across the Atlantic.”

The name sounded familiar. Kazuya thought he had read about him in a newspaper article.

“Although, he disappeared along with the balloon.”

*Ah, that story.*

“My dream is to be a great adventurer like my grandpa. Right now I want a pilot license, a motorcycle, but I also want a dress...”

While Kazuya was picturing Avril screaming as she was blown away together with the balloon, her expression turned serious. She seemed to be a different person from the bright, pretty schoolgirl she was seconds ago. A sinister shadow crept across her face.

“I actually came to this academy in search of something,” she said in a low voice. “Something very important.”

“What is that?”

“It’s... a secret!”

“Hmm...?”

The whole time he was talking with Avril, Kazuya was studying her fingers.

The fingertips on her right hand were wrapped in bandages.

A few days ago, there was a murder nearby. Kazuya was accused of being the killer, but thanks to the little detective—Victorique—the real culprit was arrested.

But there was one thing that kept bugging him.

The real culprit’s features. According to Victorique, she was a pretty blonde girl with injured fingers. Soon after, a girl with the matching description was arrested, and she herself confessed to the murder.

But Avril, who transferred to the academy soon after, was also a pretty blonde girl with injured fingers.

Was it just mere coincidence? Or was she the real culprit all along?

“What happened to your hand?” Kazuya asked, staring at her fingers.

Avril’s smile suddenly vanished. “N-Nothing serious.”

“I see.”

Avril stayed silent.

Kazuya studied Avril’s hard expression suspiciously. The shadowy, sinister look remained on her face, making her seem like a completely different person.

*Something’s off with this girl, I think...*

At that moment, Ms. Cecile, hurrying out of the school building, spotted them and waved.

Ms. Cecile was Kazuya’s, Avril’s, and Victorique’s homeroom teacher. A petite young woman, she had shoulder-length brunette hair and wore large

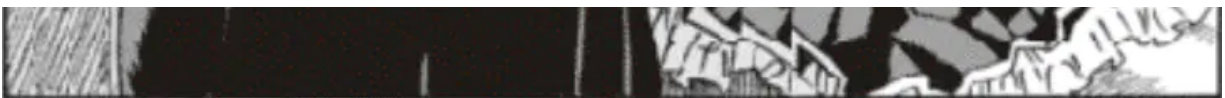


round glasses. Her baby face afforded her a lovely air.

“Perfect timing,” the teacher said cheerfully. “Can I ask you two for help after school?”

Avril agreed with a smile. Kazuya observed her face as she happily told the teacher how she liked the academy. He wondered if he was just imagining things earlier. He felt ashamed for filling his own head with sinister thoughts.





The teacher wanted them to accompany her to a funeral. An old man who had been working as a janitor in the academy for a long time had passed away due to an illness, and a simple funeral service would be held after school in the public cemetery located within the campus.

And so after school, Kazuya and Avril followed Ms. Cecile to the public cemetery situated at the opposite direction of the library.

St. Marguerite Academy was built lavishly on a large tract of land at the foot of a mountain range, utilizing the spacious gentle slopes. Separating it from the outside were tall hedges, beautifully trimmed by the gardener each season in designs resembling animals or castles.

And in the center of the campus stood the large, majestic, U-shaped school building. The spacious grounds, resembling a French-style garden, housed student dormitories, a cafeteria, a large library, and a church, all connected by beautiful garden paths flanked by flowerbeds, lawns, ponds, fountains.

Kazuya had passed by the church before, but it was Avril's first time to see it. She squealed with delight at the towering old Gothic church and the dilapidated crypt.

"So lovely!"

Kazuya didn't think so. He did not like the dark atmosphere near the church.

The crypt in question was in the middle of the cemetery. An iron door stood under a large cross. Inside was a labyrinthine, dark, spacious room where bodies were laid to rest on bunks.

Avril said it reminded her of the location of Romeo and Juliet's final scene, where the two died from poison. Kazuya agreed with her.

"It's been a long time since this place was last used," Ms. Cecile said. "We haven't opened it since one of our students died eight years ago. Fortunately, no one from the school has died since then."

The brawny morticians tried to open the iron door with the key that Ms. Cecile handed them.

The rusty key wouldn't turn that easily.

A gust blew, ruffling Avril's and Ms. Cecile's hairs.

Finally, the door was unlocked, but it wouldn't budge.

A mortician turned and asked Kazuya to help. He joined them in pulling the door.

With a creak, the door finally moved.

It smelled of rust.

And when the door was fully open, with Kazuya standing before it, something fell toward him.

A corpse.

“That’s the Reaper for you, all right,” Victorique said wearily after Kazuya finished recounting his story.

“Now, listen here!”

“This candy is hard. I don’t want it anymore.”

Kazuya sighed as he reluctantly chomped on a piece of *kaminari-otoshi* that Victorique tossed aside.

“Come on, let me finish,” he said. “So anyway...”

What fell on Kazuya was the decayed corpse of a man.

Its eye sockets were hollow, its cheeks dry, and its face was frozen in agony.

The corpse was wearing a strange outfit—a formal attire, like a medieval knight, with a primrose adorning its chest.

The corpse rattled as it fell on top of Kazuya, then rolled to the ground in several pieces—head, torso, hands. The dried primrose turned to dust and scattered in the wind.

Ms. Cecile fainted. The morticians shouted.

And then...

“Avril did something weird,” Kazuya whispered. “Though I think I was the only one who saw.”

Avril did not so much as yelp. When Kazuya glanced back at Ms. Cecile, he saw Avril pass through his field of vision with the graceful motion of a wild animal. Astonished, Kazuya followed her with his gaze.

Avril jumped over the corpse’s body parts and landed inside the crypt. She then crouched down and picked something up off the floor.

“What was it?” Victorique asked.

“A book,” Kazuya answered. “A thin book with a purple cover.”

“Hmm...”

“She quickly hid it in her bag. I heard her mumble: ‘why is this here?’”

“...Strange.”

“Yeah. Maybe that book was what she was looking for. But why was it in that place? What is that book?”

Victorique yawned. “Who knows?”

“P-Please take this seriously. You agreed that she was acting strange. Besides, you said the culprit from the other day was supposed to be a beautiful blonde girl with an injured finger. Maybe it’s just a coincidence, but Avril fits the description.”

“They already arrested the culprit,” Victorique groaned.

“Yeah... But I think Avril is actually the Springtime Reaper.”

Victorique ignored him. She retrieved the bag of *kaminari-otoshi* and munched on one; she seemed to like it despite her complaints.

“Anyway,” she went on, “the fact that the corpse fell as soon as the door was opened means the man was alive when the door was locked. Someone locked him alive in the dark crypt, and while calling for help, he ran out of strength and died while standing.”

Kazuya’s breath seized. It made sense.

“I see,” he said. “I thought for sure it was a very old corpse because of its outfit, but what you’re saying is he was locked inside when the crypt was last used eight years ago.”

That meant it wasn’t that long ago that he died.

Remembering the anguished face of the corpse, Kazuya fell silent.

“That means a murder happened in that place eight years ago. A purple book left at the scene. An English exchange student taking it. What in the world is that book?”

Suddenly the hydraulic elevator, reserved for faculty and staff, started climbing up, rattling as it shook the trees in the conservatory. The steel cage stopped with a loud clang.

The iron bars creaked open.

A fop was standing there, posing with his arms crossed, and leaning against the door.

A three-piece suit and shiny ascot tie. Silver cufflinks. And an odd, drill-shaped hairdo that ruined his entire outfit.

Inspector Grevil de Blois. An extremely annoying nobleman who was doing police work for his amusement. He tried to arrest Kazuya for the murder that happened a few days ago.



Victorique gave him a brief glance, before quickly looking away. She shoved her face into her book, picked up her pipe, and took a deep puff.

Inspector Blois, too, shot her a quick glance, without a word of greeting. Instead he turned to Kazuya.

“Hey there, Kujou!” he called cordially.

“...May I help you?” Kazuya slowly backed away.

The inspector flashed a creepy grin. “You were saved from being labelled a murderer thanks to my brilliant mind.”

“Pretty sure it was the other way around.”

“If you wish to return the favor, you may. So anyway, about the Knight Mummy Case this morning...”

Apparently the inspector came to the academy and immediately took charge of the case. Kazuya peered down the labyrinthine stairs and saw his two men who were present the other day standing near the entrance to the library. They were still holding hands, looking up anxiously.

Now that he thought about it, the inspector came here the other day as well. At first, he thought Kazuya was the culprit and was eager to arrest him, but when he heard the deduction formulated by Victorique’s Wellspring of Wisdom and learned who the real culprit was, he not only arrested them, but also took all the credit for himself.

The man didn’t look bright, yet he was lauded as a great inspector.  
*Perhaps...*

Victorique and this mysterious inspector seemed to have known each other from the beginning, but they didn’t get along for some reason. The other day, not only were they not talking to each other, their gazes didn’t even meet once. Kazuya, caught in the middle, had no idea what to do.

Kazuya glanced at Victorique. Her expression was even colder than usual, like ice.

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth. “Why don’t you listen to what he has to say, Kujou? I just happen to be here, reading. I’m not the one listening to Grevil.” Inspector Blois gave a start. “But I might overhear your conversation and offer my thoughts, not to Grevil, but you, Kujou.”

“Oh, okay... Uh...” Kazuya’s eyes darted between them. They were both looking the other way.

*What’s going on here?!*

“In that case, Kujou,” Inspector Blois said, “you and I just happen to have a conversation here. Now let’s talk.”

“Okay...”

Fixing his attention solely on Kazuya, Inspector Blois started talking. Kazuya glanced at Victorique. While her face was in her book, her tiny ears were perked up, listening silently.

“The body found in the crypt was identified as a man by the name of Maxim. He was an alumnus of the academy, although one full of mystery. He would suddenly return around spring, stay for a while, and then leave again. Rumor has it that he was quite the miscreant, extorting people, stealing. He had enemies everywhere. That’s probably what got him killed. His physical characteristics and the time of his disappearance matched perfectly. He was quite the lady-killer, apparently. Well, anyway, he returned to the academy eight years ago in spring and stayed around for a few weeks, but suddenly disappeared, leaving his belongings in his room.”

The inspector sighed. “But the question remains. Who killed him? Why was he killed in that place? The last time the crypt was used was eight years ago. According to Ms. Cecile, a female student who had been sick for a long time passed away. Since then, no one has opened that iron door. But apparently before the funeral, the key to the crypt was stolen, so they replaced the lock with a new one and kept it in a secure place. Not like there’s anything valuable inside the crypt. There’s only corpses in there.”

The inspector chuckled to himself, then returned to his serious look.

“The lock was rusty too,” he added. “Incidentally, the mortician this time worked on the funeral eight years ago, so I talked to him. Maxim was not there at the time of the funeral. Neither inside nor outside the crypt. Since the mortician checks the inside, their testimony is solid. After they checked inside, they placed the remains of the schoolgirl and locked the crypt. For the next eight years, no one has opened the iron door. So how on earth did Maxim get into the crypt? And why?”

His expression turned bitter.

“Why was Maxim dressed as a medieval knight? And what does the bundle of primrose on his chest mean?” He paused, and dropped his voice low. “The main issue is, unless Maxim entered the crypt himself, this is a murder case. Someone locked him up alive. A murder that occurred eight years ago. The murderer must still be in the academy, living here

nonchalantly, thinking no one knew about what he did. This is an inexcusable crime.”

As soon as he finished speaking, the inspector stared into the void, wearing a frown. His pointy hair glowed gold in the sunlight streaming through the skylight.

“Hmm.” Victorique lifted her head.

*Oh, what's this?* Kazuya wondered. Victorique’s face had a tinge of red. A while ago, she seemed bored and weary, but now there was a bit of life in her face. Did this mean she gained a bit of interest in the case?

“Did you figure something out?” Kazuya asked.

“This is quite the chaos. Although, a not-so-complicated one.” She reached for a *kaminari-okoshi*, brought it to her mouth with both hands, and munched on it. “The truth is quite simple. My Wellspring of Wisdom toyed with the fragments of chaos and reconstructed them to stave off my boredom. And the answer is terribly simple.”

She yawned.

When she noticed Kazuya and Inspector Blois waiting impatiently for her next words, she said wearily, “But there is one fragment missing. And you can blame your negligence for that, Grevil.”

“What?!”

“If you want to know the truth, go gather the last fragment.” Victorique turned her back on them. “Go to the mortician and ask him if there is one less body in the crypt.”

Kazuya and the inspector exchanged looks.

“Damn it. Always acting so high and mighty,” Inspector Blois grumbled as they walked down the road to the village. “This is why I hate Gray Wolves.”

“Gray Wolves?”

The inspector did not reply. His face was twisted not just in anger, but in fear.

“I’m busy with another case,” he mumbled.

Apparently, there was a rumor that an infamous thief was coming to the village, and the police station was busy dealing with the situation.

In any case, the inspector, his two subordinates, and for some reason, Kazuya, visited the funeral parlor on the outskirts of the village. After

asking them what Victorique told them to ask, the morticians rushed back to the crypt and inspected the inside.”

“There’s definitely one less body,” the younger mortician said, pointing to the back. “They’re arranged in chronological order, but there’s one empty bunk in the back.”

“That can’t be,” the older one said, surprised. “We put them in the right order. I checked eight years ago.” He pushed the younger one aside and went deeper into the crypt. “You’re right! There’s one less body! That’s weird... What’s going on here?”

The mortician and the detectives exchanged glances.

On the way back to the academy, the inspector kept mumbling to himself about the missing body and the bundle of primroses. Occasionally he would groan about Gray Wolves, and every time he did, Kazuya wondered what he meant by that.

As they walked down the campus’s white gravel path that led to the library, the leather swinging door opened, and Kazuya spotted a familiar girl scurrying out. Avril Bradley. He gasped.

Inspector Blois raised his head. “What is it?”

“Uh...”

Remembering the trouble he went through the other day when he was mistaken for the killer, Kazuya could not bring himself to tell the inspector about Avril on suspicion alone.

“It’s nothing.”

Avril’s face as she walked away had the same shadowy, sinister look that he found odd. She didn’t seem like an innocent girl. What if her cheerful side was just an act, and this was her real face?

Kazuya entered the library, perturbed. He looked around, wondering what Avril was doing inside. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just the same library.

*Maybe I’m just reading too much into it...*

Inspector Blois took the elevator up to the top floor.

Several minutes later.

When Kazuya finally made it to the conservatory, breathing hard, he found Victorique and the inspector alone, quiet.

The foliage swayed in the breeze coming in through the skylight.

“So Kujou,” the inspector began. “There was definitely one less body.”

“I know. I was with you until moments ago.”

“Who did it?”

“Stop talking to me and ask Victorique.”

“You promised to tell me the name of the culprit if I gathered the last fragment.”

“Inspector!”

“What was the name of the female student who died of an illness eight years ago?” Victorique asked without lifting her head from the book.

The inspector jerked. “Millie Marl. What about her?”

“That’s the name of the culprit.”

Victorique placed the pipe in her mouth and raised her head.

The conservatory was suddenly quiet. Kazuya and the inspector gaped at Victorique, who remained calm and composed.

“...What?”

“Millie Marl is the culprit.”

“How is she the culprit, Kujou? Millie was already dead at the time of the funeral!”

“I said stop talking to me.” Kazuya turned to Victorique. “What do you mean? Don’t tell me she was pretending to be dead or something.”

“No, she was most likely dead already. Which means this was a murder committed by the departed.”

A wisp of white smoke rose to the ceiling.

Victorique removed the book from her lap and stared at them both. Her eyes were strangely clear. She seemed neither cold nor pretentious. She wasn’t a wicked girl, just very mysterious, Kazuya decided.

“I can only imagine how,” Victorique began, “but Maxim was chosen by Millie Marl to be her companion on her journey to the afterlife. After all, a knight is supposed to accompany and protect his lady.”

“Is that why he was wearing that outfit?”

“That’s not all. I present three fragments of chaos. First is the medieval knight outfit. The second is the stolen key. And lastly, the missing body. These fragments can be reconstructed this way: Millie Marl put Maxim to sleep with a sleeping potion and dressed him in a knight’s outfit. Then, using the stolen key, she entered the crypt and replaced the remains of a

long-dead knight with the sleeping Maxim. Then she passed away. When the mortician placed Millie Marl's remains in the crypt, Maxim was still sleeping inside, unaware that he was about to join her in her journey to the afterlife. The same goes for the mortician. In the dark crypt, he didn't notice that the body that was resting there for ages was replaced by a fresh human wearing a costume. Thus, Millie Marl was buried, and the doors of the crypt were closed tight. When Maxim woke up, he found himself in darkness, with only corpses around him. Perhaps he found the dead girl and realized what happened. Or he remained in the dark, oblivious to the truth. Unfortunately, the iron door was firmly shut." Victorique closed her mouth.

Kazuya's face turned pale with horror. He glanced beside him and found Inspector Blois hanging his head, his face white as a sheet as well.

"I can't believe it..."

Victorique was staring into the distance with moist, glasslike eyes, as if gazing at the shore of human emotions, good and evil, fear and joy.

*She's a mysterious one, all right,* Kazuya thought.

Victorique opened her mouth to speak. "There's no proof, of course. This all happened eight years ago. But it makes sense."

The conservatory was wrapped in a heavy silence.

Suddenly, there was a rustling noise.

Kazuya looked up to see Inspector Blois hurrying to his feet. He turned around and started walking briskly toward the elevator. He didn't say a word to either Victorique or Kazuya.

"You should thank Victorique," Kazuya said. "She solved the case for you."

The inspector spun and shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about. I just came here to talk to a witness, you. Adieu!"

The steel cage closed.

"What the—"

Victorique glanced up. "Grevil," she called listlessly.

The inspector turned around. His face was contorted in a displeased frown. But in his eyes was a hint of fear.

"...What?" His voice was shaky.

The atmosphere between them changed again. The inspector regarded Victorique like a frightened child, while the little girl returned his gaze coolly.

It was a strange scene, as though the positions of adult and child had switched.

“You should look into Maxim’s and Millie Marl’s relationship. You mentioned that he was quite the lady-killer. But the girl’s motive for the murder lay hidden in the bundle of primroses.”

Kazuya remembered the bundle of primroses that had adorned the corpse’s chest. Dried out, it turned to dust and scattered to the wind as the corpse fell to the ground.

“Primroses signify being with someone for eternity. See you around, Grevil.”

*Clang!*

Inspector Blois’ confused face slowly disappeared as the steel cage descended.

Right before he vanished below, Kazuya saw his features twisted in frustration.

Once Inspector Blois was gone, the lush conservatory on the top floor of St. Marguerite’s Grand Library seemed to have regained its serenity.

Victorique yawned, placed the book back on her lap, and resumed reading fervently. She skimmed through the thick book, written in difficult Latin, with great speed.

Kazuya kept stealing glances at her, until eventually he mustered the courage to interrupt her.

“Hey, Victorique.”

“Hmm?! You’re still here?”

“Yup. I’ve been right next to you the whole time,” Kazuya said.

“Anyway, I get what happened with Maxim’s murder eight years ago. But there’s one more thing.”

“Do you ever stop bothering people?! What is it?!”

“Wh-Why are you mad?” Kazuya asked, taken aback by her outburst. “I came here to talk to you about it. Did you forget?”

“Of course not. But I’m too tired to deal with it.”

“Then give me back my *kaminari-okoshi*!”

They glared at each other. Dazzling sunlight pouring in through the skylight shone on their faces.

“You sure are one loud fellow,” Victorique said.

“And you’re mean, fickle, and cruel.”



“This is a quiet, book-filled paradise where one can indulge in their intellect and tedium undisturbed. Yet here I am, caught up in a stupid ruckus every time you come screaming up the labyrinthine staircase. You’ve been really annoying these past few days.”

“I-It’s just... you’re very smart.” Kazuya’s voice trembled.

Victorique snorted and looked away.

“And I thought you’d be happy if I brought you some snacks.”

Kazuya’s spirit slowly sank.

Victorique glanced at him. “It’s never boring, at least.”

Kazuya’s face lit up.

“While my greatest enemy is indeed boredom, my second greatest enemy is noise.”

“What?”

“You’re the second greatest enemy that drives away the greatest enemy. Off you go. I’ve had enough noise for today.”

“Now, look here!” Kazuya snarled.

Victorique gave in and closed her book. “What is it?!”

“I wanted to talk to you about the purple cover that Avril picked up from the crypt.”

Kazuya recalled the sinister expression on Avril’s face and the eerie purple book cover that he spotted for a brief moment.

A creepy purple book.

Found in a crypt with the corpse.

“Is that what Avril was looking for? Why was it on the floor of the crypt where the murder took place eight years ago? Is she really not involved in the crime? What on earth is that book?”

“...Are you done?” Victorique asked.

“Yup. It all boils down to that book. Right from the start. The book! And then Avril!”

“If I solve that mystery,” Victorique grunted wearily, “would you, my second greatest enemy, leave this place?” She seemed irritated.

*Does she really hate me that much?* Kazuya wondered. He nodded reluctantly, dejected.

“Speaking of Avril, I saw her leaving the library,” he said. “Was she looking for me?”

“What makes you say that?”

“She might have realized that I saw her pick up the book. So...”

“If you really suspected the girl of wrongdoing, wouldn’t you have told Grevil about it? But you didn’t.”

Kazuya nodded grudgingly. “Yeah... She seems suspicious and not at the same time. I can’t just hand her over to the inspector without being certain.”

“Hmm?” Victorique sniffed audibly and gave Kazuya a condescending look.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“So you kept quiet out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Y-Yeah... I guess so.”

“My pet theory is that virtuosity is the death of intellect. And you are a mass of virtuosity.”

“What does that even mean?! No one’s ever insulted me like that.” His face turned a little red.

Victorique opened her mouth to say something, but cut herself off. She lifted her body and stood up.

Kazuya rose to his feet as well.

Victorique’s small, enigmatic face—she looked younger than her actual age, with melancholic eyes like those of an old lady for decades—was situated rather low, much to Kazuya’s surprise. Her head only reached around his chest area, and he was rather small for a boy.

Suddenly Kazuya realized that this was the first time he had seen Victorique on her feet.

Her body was much smaller than he had imagined when she sat there, looking like an elaborately-crafted, expensive porcelain doll. The rage that had been smoldering in his chest vanished, as though consumed by the astonishment. Kazuya gaped at Victorique’s tiny figure.

Then he glanced at the pile of difficult books she had left scattered on the floor.

She read them at incredible speed, talked about her Wellspring of Wisdom in the husky voice of an elderly woman, and solved bizarre cases instantly. He couldn’t believe that this small, delicate, doll-like body contained such a brain.

Kazuya found it incredibly curious.

Who in the world was this girl?

He suddenly remembered the attitude of Inspector Grevil de Blois, who relied on the girl's intellect, but was extremely fearful of her presence, refusing to make eye contact with her.

And the enigmatic words he uttered...

***Gray Wolf!***

What did those words mean? And why was his voice quivering when he said them?

Who exactly was Victorique?

Kazuya recalled the strange incidents that had occurred over the past few days in the village and on the campus. Both were indeed wrapped in mystery.

But Kazuya realized that there was no bigger mystery than Victorique herself.

He stared at the tiny figure wrapped in laces and ribbons.

Oblivious to Kazuya's distress, Victorique scuttled down the labyrinthine stairs. As she moved, the large pink ribbon at the back of her dress fluttered softly, billowing out like a bird spreading its wings. The white lace adorning the hem shifted enticingly as she moved further and further away. She flew away like a white-and-pink bird made of ribbons and laces.

Kazuya quickly followed her. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to save your troubled soul," Victorique said. Her husky voice was a mismatch to her appearance. "A book! And a sinister exchange student. I'm going to find that book for you. You're welcome."

"Why are you going down, though? And how do you know where the book is? You've been sitting at the top of the library all this time, smoking your pipe. You haven't even seen a thing. Whoa, watch your step. You don't want to trip."





Kazuya turned pale as he looked down the flight of stairs. There was still a long way to the abyss down below. The dreadful maze of narrow staircases spiraled downwards, intertwining with each other. One wrong step and he was done.

Victorique, on the other hand, continued descending the labyrinthine staircase with a curious gait that made it seem like she was floating off the ground.

“That sinister foreign student came to this library for a reason,” she said melodiously. “And it wasn’t to look for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look around, and you’ll see. What do libraries have? Why do people come to the library?”

“The library has books...? And you come to the library... read books?”

*And to see you too, I guess.*

They finally made it to the bottom of the labyrinthine stairs. Standing at the hall, they looked up at the tube-like structure.

Books filled the entire walls, leaving only the marble floor and ceiling frescoes untouched. A riveting hall of books, filled with the smell of dust, wisdom, and the past.

“The girl came here to hide a tree in the forest,” Victorique said.

Kazuya’s breath caught. Victorique nodded in satisfaction, pleased that he understood.

“That’s right. The girl must have noticed you watching her pick up the book off the floor of the crypt. And it was possible that others saw her too. So she quickly decided to hide the purple book she was supposedly looking for. The library is the best place to hide it. After all, the walls are full of books. It would be very difficult to find the one book she hid.”

“I see!”

“Would you like to know the secret of that sinister foreign student? What the book is about?”

“Well yeah, of course. But finding it is impossible. I didn’t see where she hid the book.”

Victorique inclined her head and looked at Kazuya’s face.

Her wise eyes did not perceive him. They simply shone like jewels, sparkling with curiosity and the pleasure of solving a mystery. Having

gained a momentary release from a life of ennui, she was filled with so much joy she could start dancing.

Her body, motionless like a doll until moments ago, and her expression, once cold and affected, submerged in a sea of weariness and arrogance, were full of life, as though she was a different person altogether.

Kazuya thought he had caught a glimpse of what made this girl who possessed a sharp and mysterious mind so enigmatic. Years of weariness, profound despair, and something else gleaming behind.

But he also felt that she must not know this. It must be a very important secret to this enigmatic, golden girl.

Kazuya silently regarded the mysterious girl.

“Books, books, books!” she hissed.

Then she whirled around, and Kazuya followed her.

Victorique put her tiny little foot on the first step of the staircase.

“One!” she yelled. Her voice was as raspy as an old woman’s.

She turned. Beckoning Kazuya over, she put her feet on the second step.

“Two!” she yelled again.

“What are you doing?” Kazuya asked, confused.

“Three!”

“Four!”

“Five!”

She continued on.

Kazuya followed curiously.

Victorique slowly walked up the stairs, counting out loud.

“Eleven!”

“Twelve!”

“Thirteen!”

She spun.

Her eyes blazed like green flames.

Kazuya had never seen something so hot. Bright green flames, burning, yet somehow cold.

“If you stopped on the thirteenth step, something bad would happen, right?” Victorique said, a twinkle in her eye. “That you would get dragged to the afterlife?”

“Yeah, there’s a story that goes like that.”



“The students at this academy are very superstitious. They’re all acting as if they’re in on a big prank. It must’ve seemed bizarre to a foreigner like you who just arrived here one day.”

“Yeah, for sure...”

“That means that no student is going to stop at the thirteenth step of a staircase in this academy.”

“That makes sense.”

“I believe the foreign student thought that no matter where she hid the book in this library, there is always a possibility that someone will find it. But the shelf right before your eyes when you stand on the thirteenth step of the staircase must be safe. In other words...”

Wearing a smug look, Victorique shoved her small, child-like hand into the bookshelf. She grabbed a book with an eerie purple cover and slowly pulled it out.

“My Wellspring of Wisdom told me that she must have hidden the purple book on the shelf by the thirteenth step.”

Kazuya glanced back and forth between Victorique and the purple book, mouth agape.

When he was finally able to speak, he said, “I get it.”

Victorique nodded with a smile, a smile so pure and innocent, as if she were a child being praised. Kazuya found this change very surprising, but there were more important matters at hand.

Bringing their faces close, they flipped the purple book to the first page.

A book lying at the scene of a murder eight years ago. Avril, a strange foreign student who said she came from England to search for something, found the book and hid it in the library. A black and purple book, as dark and eerie as Avril herself.

Kazuya would later reflect how if they had not found the book, the subsequent incidents would not have occurred. Victorique, the silent Gray Wolf, would get involved in a different case with this eerie book, and she would find herself on the run with Kazuya.

But that is a story for another day.

## **Chapter 3: The Ghost of Millie Marl Haunts the Abandoned Storehouse**

A warm spring afternoon.

St. Marguerite's Grand Library was a majestic tower that was built in the 17th century. Inside was a hall with a high ceiling, walls covered in bookcases, and a narrow labyrinth of stairs leading up to the ceiling.

The tower was located at the far end of the campus of St. Marguerite Academy, a prestigious school for children of the aristocracy that stood quietly in the mountains of the Kingdom of Sauville, Western Europe's little giant. For the last few centuries, it was thick with the smell of dust, dirt, and wisdom, from high above to down below, and filled with an atmosphere of hallowed tranquility.

On one cold and humid spring day, the air still carrying with it the chill of winter, there was a refreshing sound of conversation between a boy and a girl in the hall by the entrance of the library, quite unusually.

"My Wellspring of Wisdom told me that she must have hidden the purple book on the shelf by the thirteenth step."

"I see."

"Here you go."

"Whoa! You were right. That's the book I saw, Victorique. I can't believe you actually found it! Man, you're amazing. But also weird."

There was a loud thud.

Slowly, the tiny girl who had been speaking in a husky came down the wooden staircase first. Her appearance was reminiscent of an elaborate porcelain doll. Her long, magnificent, golden hair hung down her back like an untied velvet turban, and her green eyes flickered mysteriously. Her small, graceful arms and legs, which looked like puppet limbs when she moved, were wrapped in a lovely, luxurious dress, billowy with layers of white lace and a pink ribbon.

In her hand was an old book with a purple cover.

A small oriental boy came down next, rubbing the side of his head with tears in his eyes. He had kind, gentle black eyes, but there was a stubborn set to his jaw.

“That hurt like hell,” he grumbled. Victorique had hit him with the edge of the book. “Hey, are you listening?”

Victorique sniffed sharply in response.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to care a little.”

“I don’t care. Time to read the book.”

Victorique opened the book, and frowned when she realized that the hall was too dim for reading.

“I’ve never been hit by a girl before,” Kazuya went on. “As the third son of an imperial soldier, I hereby protest your actions. A woman must stay humble and not look at other men... No, wait. That’s not right. How did it go again?”

“Silence.”

“S-Sorry.” Kazuya slumped.

He gave up on protesting. Instead he opened the library’s swinging door together with the small, terrifying Victorique, and sat down on the stone steps outside, where it was bright.

Kazuya was down just seconds ago, but he seemed to have cheered up.

“Let’s read it, Victorique,” he said with a bright smile.

“Okay.” Victorique looked somewhat disgruntled, but reluctantly opened the purple book. “Hmm, hmm.” She flipped through the pages, reading with incredible speed.

Kazuya brought his head closer to peer at the pages before Victorique could turn them.

Victorique frowned grimly. Kazuya’s head cast a shadow on the book, making it difficult to read. But he was so engrossed in reading that he didn’t seem to notice the signs of danger appearing in Victorique’s small face.

The purple book was about witchcraft, containing in-depth descriptions of necromancy, a spell used by wandering gypsies since the Middle ages.

“Twenty pigeon hearts,” Kazuya read. “Seven owl eyeballs. And three drachmas of a human child’s blood. How many pints of blood is a drachma? What a disturbing book. Ouch!” He groaned, holding his head.

Victorique had slammed the edge of the book on Kazuya’s head as hard as she could. It was loud. She glanced at him. Snorting, she turned her back

to Kazuya and resumed reading on her own.

Kazuya rose to his feet. “What is wrong with you?! Do you have something against my head?!”

“Your head was surprisingly ruining my reading,” Victorique said curtly.

“How is my head ruining your reading?! Don’t you ever think about reading a book with someone?”

Victorique looked up. She studied Kazuya’s face with a very curious expression. Then she opened her small lips, red as strawberries. “No.”

“Yeah, figured.” Kazuya plopped down.

A piece of paper fluttered down from the purple book.

It was a postcard, depicting a view of a city by what seemed like the Mediterranean Sea. It bore the recipient’s name on the front—Avril Bradley. The sender’s name was Sir Bradley.

“That’s Avril’s grandfather,” Kazuya said as he rubbed his head. “He was a famous English adventurer. He disappeared somewhere in the Atlantic with his balloon.”

Victorique pointed to the postcard. “There’s a stamp, but no postmark.”

Kazuya cocked his head. “You’re right. So this letter had not yet reached Avril? It’s been in the crypt the whole time, stuck in a book?”

“Who knows?”

Victorique stood up abruptly. She placed the purple book in Kazuya’s lap and trotted away without a word. With her small hands, she pushed the huge library door open and went back inside, still holding the postcard.

“Victorique?”

No reply.

“What’s gotten into you? Are you done with the book?”

The door slammed shut.

Kazuya was getting pissed at Victorique’s behavior. “Listen here. Wait, huh? Victorique?” He opened the door, following Victorique inside, but found no one. “Victorique? Where’d you go?”

The mysterious girl, puffed up with frills and laces, vanished like smoke.

Kazuya looked up the long, labyrinthine stairs. There was no one there either. There was an elevator at the end of the hall, which only faculty and staff could use, so that was out of the question.

“Hello? Where are you, you weird, smart, little meanie?”

No reply.

Kazuya stood there regretfully for a while, before giving up and leaving the library reluctantly.

“What the hell is her problem? She smacks my head, hurls insults, leaves the book, and disappears. She’s weird, all right. I’ve never met a girl like her before. Not even heard of one.”

Kazuya was walking with the purple book under his arm, mumbling to himself.

He climbed all the way up the top of the library to get to know the mysterious girl—Victorique. He felt as if he had lost her, like a little bird in his hand that flew away. He felt disappointed, lonely, anxious.

Kazuya remembered the object that fell from far above when he entered the library. Victorique had noticed Kazuya sneezing and dropped a piece of tissue paper.

“I thought we were getting pretty close.” He let his shoulders sag.

Kazuya was walking along a different gravel path before returning to his dormitory, when he found himself in front of an abandoned, run-down structure.

Once a storehouse, it had no use at the moment, and none came near it. It was rotting and creepy.

As he stared at it, a cold wind blew. The sun suddenly dimmed. Kazuya looked up and saw gray clouds drifting in. The wind blew again.

Curious, Kazuya approached the storehouse. He peered inside and saw piles of old desks, chairs, dirty mirrors.

As soon as he took a couple of steps inside...

*Thwack!*

He was hit on the back of his head. It felt hard. The impact was far greater than when the small girl hit him with the book earlier.

Kazuya’s vision turned white, and he fell flat on the floor.

When he came to, he found himself in a bed in the infirmary. A woman was cooling his head.

Ms. Cecile.

When the teacher saw that he had regained consciousness, she said, “Kujou, any reason you were napping in the storehouse?” She looked aghast.

“What? Uh no, I wasn’t taking a nap.”

Scratching his head, he lifted his body up.

*Someone hit me from behind. But who, and why? Was it Avril trying to retrieve the purple book?*

He looked around, but the purple book was nowhere to be found.

“Teach, when I was brought here, was I holding a book with a purple cover?”

Ms. Cecile tilted her head. “A purple book? Nope.”

“I see... Uh, did you see Avril near the storehouse, then?”

“Did I see her? She was the one who found you lying there. I immediately called the gardener and had him carry you here.”

*If Avril helped me, does that mean she wasn’t the one who hit me?*

The door to the infirmary slowly opened. Kazuya saw a pale hand gripping the doorknob.

“Kujou?” Avril peered in. “Are you okay?”

Kazuya’s and Avril’s gazes met. Feeling a strange chill, Kazuya winced back. Avril was staring at him with an odd, inscrutable look on her face.

“Silly Kujou,” she said. “Why were you sleeping there? Too much studying and not enough sleep? Believe me, I was shocked.”

Suddenly she returned to the normal, cheerful Avril. Puzzled by the change, Kazuya fell silent.

*Maybe I’m wrong to suspect her... But she was the one who found and hid the purple book, so maybe she attacked me ‘cause I was carrying it around? I could just be overthinking things. Surely she wouldn’t do that.*

Avril smiled, unaware of the things going through his mind. “Hey, did you know? That storehouse is apparently famous among the students.”

“No...”

“There’s this ghost of a schoolgirl who died from an illness.

As soon as Avril started talking, Ms. Cecile let out a yelp. “I uhh... I have to create questions for the exam. Oh, and I have to water the flower pots too!” She dashed out of the infirmary, leaving both Kazuya and Avril confused.

The door slammed shut, and the sound of running footsteps faded into the distance.

“They say it’s haunted,” Avril said, getting back on topic. “There’s an underground staircase inside that leads to the afterlife. If the ghost beckons

you, and you go down the stairs, you will die.”

Kazuya frowned. “Are you referring to Millie Marl?”

“Maybe. But isn’t it inappropriate to gossip about the dead for fun?”

Avril murmured sincerely. “Not a fan of ghost stories, I think.”

Kazuya had seen this look on her face before—mature, not the expression a fifteen-year-old would make. He wondered if she was really his age.

Avril helped Kazuya off the bed. “Also, there’s a story about the library,” she added.

“The library?” Kazuya asked, surprised.

“Yeah. A golden fairy lives at the top. She knows all the mysteries of the world, but in return she demands your soul. That sounds more like a demon than a fairy, doesn’t it?”

“There’s no fairies or demons at the top of the library,” Kazuya said, looking perplexed. “Only Victorique.”

“Who’s Victorique?”

“Did you see that empty seat in our classroom? The one by the window. That seat belongs to Victorique. She always skips class and stays in the library. So the girl at the top of the library is not a golden fairy, but a blonde girl, and what she demands in return is not a soul, but rare, exotic snacks.”

“Hmm...?”

Avril’s eyes lit up with interest as she nodded repeatedly.

Kazuya parted ways with Avril. As he walked down the hallway, a golden, pointy head came from the opposite direction. It was Inspector Grevil de Blois.

He was accompanied by his two men, wearing rabbit-skin caps and holding hands. When he spotted Kazuya, he struck a pose.

“Hey there, Kujou!” the inspector greeted. “Have you, uhm, seen...”

“Seen what?”

“I dropped something, you see. No, never mind.” He decided to ask a different question instead. “I’m so busy these days. As soon as the mummy case was solved, I got another one. Do you know of a man named Ciaran?”

“Nope. Never heard of him.”

“Ciaran is a famous master thief who struck all of Europe. No one has ever seen him, and no one knows what his real name is. He’s been lying low



for the last seven or eight years. They say either he's retired, living an easy life somewhere, or he died in an accident."

"But you see, Kujou," he continued. "Recently there's been a bit of a commotion in Saubreme over a thief who calls themselves the second Ciaran. Apparently, they're very young. We received information from the Saubreme Police Department that the second Ciaran was headed to this village. Someone spotted them getting on a train. I don't know the details, but what would a master thief be doing in a village in the middle of nowhere? There are only vineyards, apple orchards, and the mysterious St. Marguerite Academy." Inspector Blois cocked his head. "I'm absolutely clueless."

"So am I," Kazuya said. "Though if I tell Victorique about it, she might be able to figure it out immediately."

The inspector pretended not to hear what he said. Kazuya stared at his face.

He wondered what the connection was between this eccentric aristocrat and that incredibly strange girl on top of the library.

Inspector Blois was in charge of investigating the case of the decapitated motorcycle rider, which Kazuya was involved in, and the case of the mummified knight, and he solved both cases with the help of Victorique. He knew where Victorique was, and how smart she was, and despite needing her help, he made sure never to talk to her directly.

Victorique, on the other hand, did not seem to care about Inspector Blois. She just snubbed him.

How did these two people know each other? And why did they get along so badly?

"That reminds me," the inspector said, "Millie Marl, the culprit in the mummified knight case. Your homeroom teacher, Cecile, used to be a student at this school."

"I see..."

"Now get this. Cecile was a student eight years ago. Do you follow? She and the late Millie Marl were classmates."

Kazuya's eyes widened in surprise.

Ms. Cecile never said anything about that when she entered the crypt or when the body was found.

“I saw her a few minutes ago when she came out of the infirmary. When I told her that Millie Marl was the culprit, she seemed quite shocked.” Inspector Blois pointed to the flowerbed behind the school building. “She wandered off over there. I think she was crying.”

Inspector Blois then walked down the hallway with his men in tow.

Unsure what to do, Kazuya made his way to the flowerbeds behind the school building.

He spotted Ms. Cecile near the flowerbeds, looking depressed. She was squatting down, poking at the ground with a twig she found, sighing.

Kazuya wondered what to do. Before he could speak to her about the incident, his eyes were drawn to what the teacher was holding under her arm.





It was, to Kazuya's surprise, the purple book that he lost.

"That book!" he gasped.

Noticing Kazuya, Ms. Cecile stood up.

"Why do you have that book?"

Ms. Cecile blinked. "You mean this? I found it lying behind the flowerbed. Is this yours?"

"Y-Yeah."

"You should treasure your books more. What kind of a book is this anyway?"

Kazuya stammered as he took the book. He couldn't possibly tell her it was a book about raising the dead.

*She found it behind the flowerbeds? What does that mean? Avril hid the book, I found it, then while I was carrying it, someone attacked me. How did the book end up in a flowerbed?*

He suddenly thought about Victorique. She was reading the book with great enthusiasm, but then suddenly lost interest and left.

*What in the world is going on here?*

Kazuya was at his wits' end. Ms. Cecile regarded him perplexedly.

Kazuya collected himself. "By the way, Inspector Blois told me something."

"Oh, what did he tell you?"

"He said you and Millie Marl were classmates."

Ms. Cecile looked astonished. "That's right."

"Were you close?"

"Yes. So I was very shocked to learn the truth."

Ms. Cecile's face dimmed.

Kazuya and Ms. Cecile left the flowerbeds and strolled through the garden that spread across the campus.

Ms. Cecile's forehead creased. "I really didn't want to go to the crypt alone, because that's where Millie was laid to rest. I get sad. So I decided to ask you and Avril for help."

"I see..."

"And then that happened... I can't believe Millie actually killed someone."

Kazuya realized that they were now near the storehouse where he was knocked out earlier.

He pointed to the storehouse. “That’s where I was earlier.”

“You were sleeping there?” Ms. Cecile said, appalled. “Why?”

“I wasn’t sleeping.” Kazuya slowly approached the storehouse. “Avril told me that students don’t come near this place. She said that there’s a story about the ghost of a female student—Millie Marl—dragging people to the afterlife, or something.”

“Really?!”

Ms. Cecile peered inside the storehouse, holding Kazuya’s arm with both hands. She felt a little scared.

The inside of the storehouse was dusty. Behind the pile of old desks and chairs was a dirty spiral staircase that seemed to lead to the basement. It was dim. Sunlight streaming through the door made motes of dust glitter.

A moan seemed to come from deeper inside—no, from the basement.

Kazuya and Ms. Cecile exchanged looks. They listened closely, but heard nothing now.

“I thought I heard someone,” Kazuya said.

He glanced over his shoulder and was shocked to see Ms. Cecile’s face. The droopy, puppy-dog eyes behind her large, round glasses were filled with tears, and her shoulders were shaking.

“I’m scared!” she cried.

“...What?”

“I’m scared! I’ll get mad!”

“At me? Why?”

“Because I’m scared!”

Ms. Cecile was quite the scaredy-cat, it seemed. Now that he thought about it, back in the infirmary, she left with a bunch of excuses as soon as Avril started sharing some ghost stories.

Her gentle demeanor from earlier was completely gone. She poked Kazuya repeatedly with her forefinger, urging him to go inside first.

A cold wind caressed their cheeks.

A loud rattle came from an empty space.

Ms. Cecile shuddered and stuck close behind Kazuya. “Let me know if there’s something, okay?” she said. “I took off my glasses, so I can’t see anything! Not even ghosts!”

Kazuya glanced back again. She had indeed taken off her glasses and was looking at Kazuya blankly. Her brown eyes, which looked much larger than when she was wearing her glasses, darted around restlessly.

She tripped on a fallen wooden box and yelped like a child.

“Just put on your glasses,” Kazuya groaned. “Or you’re gonna hurt yourself.”

Clicking her tongue, Ms. Cecile put on her glasses.

“...elp.”

A voice echoed.

They exchanged glances and shook their heads.

“Help...!”

It was the voice of a girl.

They turned, and saw the upper body of a pale girl in the darker part of the storehouse. She had short blonde hair, and blue eyes, large and bright. She had a rather pretty face, but her skin was pale and her cheeks were hollow.

“It’s a ghost!” Ms. Cecile screamed.

There was a strange sound, and the girl’s figure vanished.

“She disappeared?!” Ms. Cecile screamed again. With trembling hands, she took off her glasses and firmly handed them to Kazuya. “Now I can’t see anything!” She then stumbled out of the storehouse with a tight grip on Kazuya’s arm. “Nooooo!”

“T-Teach?!”

Ms. Cecile ran away screaming, but her stride was so short that Kazuya caught up with her by just walking fast.

“Teach, your glasses!”

When they were far, far away from the storehouse, Ms. Cecile finally stopped, took the glasses from Kazuya, put them back on with both hands, and then, in a firm tone, said, “Don’t tell the other students, okay? If you do, I’ll fail you.”

“I won’t! And I don’t fail. Anyway, what do you think that was about?”

“I-I-It was a ghost,” she said, keeping her eyes shut.

“There are no such things as ghosts, Teach.”

“But it wasn’t Millie Marl.”

“...What?”



Ms. Cecile opened her brown eyes. “It was a ghost, but the ghost of another girl. Her face was different from Millie’s. I’ve never seen her before.”

Baffled, they exchanged looks.

“Whose ghost was it, I wonder?”

A chilly wind blew past them.

Meanwhile, at St. Marguerite’s Grand Library, a strange, tube-shaped tower filled with the smell of dust, dirt, and wisdom.

“There’s a girl here?”

Standing in the hall, Avril looked up.

“This is no place for a girl. It’s a place for old people, at best. Or ghosts.”

She chuckled at her own words.

“It must be a cozy place for ghosts, though. I wish the ghost of Millie Marl was here instead of that old storehouse.”

She threw her head back and laughed. Then she suddenly stopped, turned serious, and started running up the maze of narrow wooden stairs that led up to the top.

Light and lively footsteps echoed in the dim tower in odd counterpoint.

The huge bookcases that covered the entire walls quivered as the wooden stairs shook.

Ten minutes later...

“Haa... haa...”

Avril ran up spiritedly the first few minutes, but the labyrinthine stairs, which seemed to stretch on forever, wore her out, and by the last few steps, she was breathing hard with her palms on her knees.

“What’s Kujou thinking... climbing these stairs... normally...?”

Avril looked down the dizzying height. She could see the first-floor hall far below. She followed the labyrinthine stairs with her eyes. Like a squirming, eerie creature, it led from the floor to every corner, ultimately ending at the foot of the stairs where she was standing.

Avril shuddered despite herself. It looked as if the labyrinthine staircase would start moving at any moment and grab her.

“I have a bad feeling about this place,” she mumbled.

Avril hurried up the stairs, stepping out onto the white floor at the top.  
She gasped.

A conservatory greeted her.

The lush greenhouse was filled with tropical trees and garish flowers.  
The sun peeked through the square skylight above.

Avril looked around. "It doesn't look like..." Her voice grew louder.  
"Doesn't look like anyone's around."

The place was deserted.

Avril looked around again and again.

Between the conservatory and the staircase, there was a poorly-lit space about the size of a small room, littered with antique-looking glass lamps, stacks of difficult books, and an old ceramic pipe.

Avril studied the spot with a frown.

The items were covered in dust. She thought she saw a layer of white dust on the floor, as though silence had piled up over a long time.

"There's no one here," Avril mumbled once more. "If there is, they've gotta be a ghost. Yay, ghosts!" She raised her voice to push the fear away.

Looking around, she started walking. When she neared the entrance to the conservatory, she let out a yelp of genuine fright.

Slowly, her contorted expression turned into a smile of relief.

An extravagant porcelain doll was propped up against the wall.

It looked terribly lonely.

Although much smaller than a human, it was very heavy for a doll. It was clothed in a luxurious Gobelin dress. Long, blonde hair hung down from a small head covered in a crocheted bonnet.

Its eyes were frozen wide open.

Avril suddenly smiled, reached for the doll, and gently lifted it up. Then she hugged it tightly, bringing her face close to the doll's, and studied its detailed features, with its individually planted eyelashes.

"How adorable!"

It seemed to have been left there for a long time. She sat it down on the floor and brushed the dust off its luxurious dress and hat.

"Looks like a very expensive doll. I think..."

Avril's expression suddenly changed. It was cold and mature, a completely different face from the cheerful girl she showed to Kazuya and

Ms. Cecile.

“This is the work of Grafen Stein, a genius doll maker from the last century. It’s his signature right here.”

Gently lifting the doll’s long, blonde hair, she nodded in satisfaction as she checked the fancy letter “G” on the nape.

“Grafen Stein, the doll maker who made a deal with the devil to put souls into his dolls. Dark porcelain dolls that receive evil souls and walk around at night. His creations fetch a fortune when sold. What a discovery. I came this far into the mountains to obtain the secret legacy of adventurer Sir Bradley, but I didn’t expect to find something like this. You’ve done it again, Ciaran the Second. Maybe I shouldn’t toot my own horn too much. Looks like I might just be as good as the First. Now as for this little girl...”

Avril lifted the doll and looked around. She found a small chest and tried to open the lid to hide the doll in it, but for some reason it wouldn’t budge, so she gave up and quietly hid the doll behind the chest instead.

“Someone might see if I leave the library with the doll in my arms. I hid the purple book carefully too, but someone must have spotted me. Sir Bradley’s legacy that I had found was immediately snatched away from me. I’ll try to get it back, but for now, this doll is staying here. Right! I can just bring a bag to hide it in. No one would notice a dusty doll was stolen anyway. What an unexpected find, though.”

Nodding with satisfaction, she rose to her feet. Then she frowned, remembering something.

“Wait a minute.” Her expression turned curious. “Kujou told me about this place. If I recall correctly, he said there was a girl called Victorique or something. I don’t see her anywhere, though.”

Avril looked around.

An old pipe. A pile of difficult books. Lamps.

Everything seemed unreal, as though untouched for a hundred years. There was a dreamlike silence about the place.

“Don’t tell me you’re the girl that Kujou was talking about,” Avril joked at the doll. “No way, right?”

The porcelain doll did not answer, of course. Its wide, frozen eyes were staring vacantly at her.

“It can’t be... right?”

None gave her an answer.

Avril suddenly shuddered. “A golden fairy lives at the top of the library,” she mumbled.

She turned to the chest where she had hidden the doll and regarded it eerily.

“The fairy demands souls in return...”

Sensing something, she backed away.

“A female doll made by Grafen Stein, a doll maker from the last century, housing a soul inserted by the Devil himself.”

A cold wind blew through the skylight.

“You’re not going to bewitch Kujou and take his soul, are you?”

The doll’s lips, made of pale porcelain, moved. Or so it seemed.

Avril yelped. She retreated several steps and almost fell down the staircase landing. She gave an uncharacteristic click of her tongue.

“N-No way. It’s not possible!” she shouted shakily, and scurried down the labyrinthine stairs.

Meanwhile, Kazuya was hurrying to the library. After calming down the frightened Ms. Cecile, he went back to the dormitory in search of some unusual snacks.

As soon as he entered the library hall, he bumped hard into someone leaving. It was Avril. For some reason, she was breathing heavily.

“K-Kujou!” she gasped.

“What’s wrong, Avril?”

“I uh... went to the conservatory you told me about.”

“Did you climb to the top? Must’ve been tough, huh? So, what’s wrong?”

Avril was silent, looking like she wanted to say something. “I-It’s nothing,” she said finally. Shaking her head, she hastened out of the library.

“What was that about?” Kazuya wondered.

He did not follow her, and entered the library instead.

The library was quiet as usual. The air was distinctly dusty in the still sanctuary.

Kazuya looked up at the labyrinthine that stretched to the ceiling gloomily, but with a nod he straightened his posture and began climbing. His footsteps echoed loudly.

But the stairs were long.

Kazuya climbed.

And climbed.

Still climbing.

How long had he been climbing now? He was starting to feel like an evil spell had been cast on him, making him go around in circles. If he looked down, the height would disorient him, stopping him in his tracks.

Suddenly, something small and golden moved in the upper part of his field of vision. Kazuya stopped and squinted.

“Victorique?”

“I trust you brought snacks.” A husky, elderly voice came from far above.

“I did,” Kazuya said, aghast. “It’s called *karintō*<sup>1</sup>. It’s a little hard, but I don’t want to hear any complaints.”

Sniffing audibly, Victorique pulled her head back. Her long, golden hair wriggled like the tail of some strange, ancient creature, and disappeared after her.

“I just passed Avril at the door,” Kazuya said once he made it to the top. He was breathing raggedly. “She said something about the conservatory. Did you see her?”

“...”

Victorique ignored him.

“Hello?”

“...No,” she said curtly, with reluctance.

“So you didn’t see her? That’s weird.”

Victorique picked up a *karinto* with a scowl. She studied it from the side, above, then moved it closer to her tiny nose for a sniff.





“It smells sweet!”

Kazuya glanced at Victorique’s face. Her smile said she liked it.

“Of course,” Kazuya said happily. “It’s candy, after all.”

“It looks like dog poop, though.”

“Girls shouldn’t say poop.”

Victorique opened her small lips and popped a *karinto* into her mouth.

She frowned. “It’s hard.”

“I see you don’t like hard things,” Kazuya said. “You even threw away the *kaminari-okoshi*. You’re like an old lady. Ow!”

Victorique kicked his shin with the sole of her boot. Reeling from the pain, Kazuya cast a sidelong glance at her. She seemed to like the *karinto*. She was reaching for a second one, much to his relief.

“Ow... Anyway, I have more things to share,” Kazuya said. “I’ll start from the top. So I ran into Inspector Blois earlier. Apparently he’s searching for a master thief called Ciaran the Second or something. No one knows their name or face. And then...”

Kazuya proceeded to tell her everything that happened so far.

“I know who Ciaran is,” Victorique said casually.

“What do you know about them?” Kazuya asked, baffled.

“Their name and face.”

“...”

“The one named Avril or whatever. She’s Ciaran the Second. She was here earlier, bragging about herself. She looked pretty dumb, though.”

Losing interest in the subject, Victorique placed a book on her lap and started reading at great speed. After finishing the page in no time at all, she flipped to the next one.

Kazuya dropped his *karinto*.

Victorique lifted her gaze. “What’s the matter?” she asked. “Why is your mouth open like an idiot? Don’t cry to me if you swallow a bug.”

“Avril is Ciaran?!”

“That’s what I said.”

“Are you sure?”

“What would I gain from lying?”

Victorique ignored him and went back to reading. She was munching on a *karinto*.

“No way!”



“Shut up, Kujou!” Victorique barked. She grabbed a handful of *karinto* and threw them at Kazuya. “Be quiet! I’m reading.”

“...What does this mean?”

“How should I know?”

Victorique ignored him for a while, smoking her pipe. Then she glanced at him with a devilish grin.

“Would you like to hear it?” she asked.

“Hear what?”

“The truth that my Wellspring of Wisdom had reconstructed after toying with fragments of chaos to stave off my boredom.”

Kazuya leaned forward. “You mean solve the mystery? But what else do you know?”

“The identity of the first Ciaran.”

“What? Is it someone we know?” Kazuya asked, bewildered. “Who is it?”

Victorique’s green eyes widened. A cold flame was burning inside. A fearless, sorrowful, strange flame that he had never seen before.

“It’s...”

Victorique uttered a name.

The master thief Ciaran was in St. Marguerite Academy. And the mysterious foreign student was his successor.

She was after a mysterious, purple book that described sinister rituals of resurrecting the dead.

Kazuya Kujou, a foreign exchange student from the Orient, was dragged into the case, together with a mysterious girl with a bizarre intellect—his guardian angel, or a demon after his soul—Victorique.

Victorique and Kazuya’s adventure over the purple book will later come to a surprising conclusion, but that’s a story for another time.

## Chapter 4: A Golden Fairy Lives At the Top of the Library

A quiet, spring evening.

St. Marguerite's Grand Library.

One of Europe's largest bookhouses, its stone walls marked by time. Inside, past the riveted leather doors, bookshelves covered the walls. It was a solemn space, filled with knowledge, time, and quietness.

It stood hidden deep within the campus of St. Marguerite Academy, a prestigious school for children of the aristocracy located in the mountains of the Kingdom of Sauville, a small country in Western Europe. For the past three hundred years, the building had maintained its miraculous tranquility.

"Whaaat?! Maxim is Ciaran?!"

Far above the supposedly quiet library, from a space near the ceiling adorned with majestic religious paintings, echoed a boy's surprised cry. A strange murmur swept across the hall, as if the tens of thousands of books on the walls, which had been drifting in silence for so long, slowly opened their wrinkly eyes and looked up at the ceiling.

A narrow wooden staircase rose perilously from the hall below like a gigantic maze. Far above, near the ceiling, was a lush conservatory, filled with tropical plants and blooming flowers. The boy's voice seemed to come from around there.

"You're too loud, Kujou!"

"Wh-What do you mean?"

"How should I know?"

Mixed in with the boy's cry was a strange voice, husky like an old lady's, yet somehow sonorous. The voice was lashing at the boy violently. For a while, the boy groaned thoughtfully, until eventually silence blanketed the conservatory.

A small, kind-looking oriental boy was sitting there, holding his knees. There was a tiny, intricate doll in front of him.

A doll of a girl, nearly life-size, about 140 centimeters tall. It was dressed in an extravagant, heavy-looking dress, puffy with white laces and pink ribbons. Her long, magnificent golden hair hung to the floor like an untied velvet turban. Only the side of her small face was visible, but on her awe-inspiring, handsome features, green eyes flickered with breathtaking ruthlessness.

A thick book lay on the doll's lap and all around her in a pattern reminiscent of magic circles.

She brought the ceramic pipe in her elaborate hand to her mouth and took a drag.

A wisp of white smoke slowly drifted to the skylight.

"Avril being the second Ciaran is surprising, but how do you know that the first one was Maxim?" Kazuya asked.

"The first Ciaran disappeared suddenly seven or eight years ago," the doll—no, the girl, so small, beautiful, and cold that she *seemed* like a doll, Victorique—answered wearily. "Maxim returned to the academy every spring, but was killed eight years ago. Then his body was found and the second Ciaran arrived. Is this a coincidence?"

"B-But..."

"Maxim, or rather, the first Ciaran, probably returned to the academy every spring to hide the treasures he acquired. Like how pirates hide their treasures in caves. The purple book was one of them. But before he could hide it, he was locked up in the crypt along with it. This is mere speculation, though."

Victorique turned her attention back to the book and resumed reading at tremendous speed. She turned a page and read, and then turned and read again. She occasionally brought her pipe to her mouth and took puffs. Kazuya watched her intently.

Suddenly, Victorique dropped her book. Her green eyes widened as she stared into the void.

"What's the matter?" Kazuya asked.

"I'm bored!"

"What?"

"I read and read, but I'm still bored! The dumb-looking man over there. You! I believe your name was Kujou. Do something that would surprise me."

“Wh-Who are you calling dumb?! Besides, I can’t think of anything...”

“For example.” Victorique approached Kazuya with a serious look on her face. Sensing trouble, he retreated. “Stick your head between your legs and smile, or spin a plate on a stick on your belly.”

“I can’t do either of that!”

“Why not? You’re an oriental, aren’t you?”

“That’s just racist!”

Kazuya stood up. He was legitimately angry. She was a member of the nobility of Sauvville, the little giant of Western Europe, but Kazuya, as the third son of an imperial soldier, decided that he would not stand for such insults.

“Victorique,” he said with a hard look.

“Hold that thought,” Victorique said. “What did the ghost in the storehouse say to you and Cecile?”

Kazuya paused, the wind taken out of his sails. “I think it was ‘help’.”

“That sounds serious. Why don’t you go help her?”

“The ghost?”

“You are such an idiot.”

Kazuya’s anger flared again, but Victorique was unfazed.

She opened her small, cherry lips. “It’s not a ghost that’s in the storehouse. It’s a girl. You mentioned blonde hair and blue eyes? Oh, no!”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Is Grevil still in the academy? If he is, take him to the storehouse. He sports a weird hairdo, but he’s technically a cop. Authority, of course, is nothing but an excrement of civilization, but it can be of some use.”

“I don’t mind,” Kazuya said, baffled. “But what are we going to do there?”

Victorique spread both hands and waved them around in protest.

“Don’t you get it?!” She sounded vexed. “You’re going to save a girl with short blonde hair and blue eyes.”

“...Who?”

“Avril Bradley. Just go. I’ll have you stick your head between your legs some other time. Leave, now.”

Kazuya looked perplexed as he descended the labyrinthine staircase, completely clueless.

“...Huh?”

Avril, the very person they were talking about, was hurrying up the stairs. She was carrying a large suitcase for some reason. It seemed light and empty.

“Hey,” Kazuya called.

Avril looked up.

“What’s with the suitcase?”

“I’m going to put Grafen Stein’s work inside,” she replied. “I mean, it’s nothing. I’m in a bit of a hurry. What were you doing here?”

“I was talking to Victorique,” Kazuya said as he passed by Avril in the perilously narrow stairs. “She asked me to do something.”

“Victorique?” Avril watched Kazuya descend in a hurry, confused. “Is he serious? There’s no girl up in the conservatory. Is the evil soul within the doll ordering him around? What’s going on here?”

With an empty suitcase in hand, Avril continued climbing the labyrinthine stairs.

After leaving the library, Kazuya wandered around the campus in search of Inspector Blois. Every time he ran into a teacher, he would describe the inspector’s bizarre hairstyle—blonde hair that was hardened into the shape of a drill.

“If you’re talking about the weirdo, he went that way,” a teacher said.

Kazuya sprinted toward the direction they were pointing at.

Soon after, he found Inspector Blois. It was almost evening, and the bright setting sun was shining on the man’s golden drill. Kazuya explained to the inspector that he did not know what was going on but that Victorique wanted him to go to the storehouse.

Inspector Blois frowned. “I don’t know this Victorique you speak of, but let’s go check the place out.”

“Inspector...!”

“Oh, don’t give me that look.”

Inspector Blois quickly led the way to the storehouse.

The storehouse was dim and humid, filled with disorganized piles of dusty desks and chairs, dirty mirrors, and other items.

The inspector proceeded cautiously, one step at a time.

“Kujou,” he said. “There’s a ghost here, right?”

“Yeah. Millie Marl’s ghost. It’s just a rumor, though.”

“And you and that female teacher saw it.”

“Wait, are you scared?”

Inspector Blois whirled around. Kazuya swiftly dodged the tip of the drill that almost pierced his forehead.







“I am *not* scared!”

“But Ms. Cecile said that the ghost we saw was not Millie. It was the face of a different person.”

“Then who is it?”

“No idea. But when I told Victorique about it, she said it was Avril Bradley. She then told me to go help her. I’m not sure what she means, though. Avril is very much alive. I just passed her on the stairs in the library.”

Kazuya and Inspector Blois exchanged looks, confused.

“Even I, a famed inspector, am clueless.”

“I can imagine.”

They glared at each other, and continued on, one step at a time.

Deeper inside the storehouse, someone lay collapsed on the floor.

Inspector Blois yelped, while Kazuya rushed over. It was a girl of his age, he realized.

“It’s her...”

The girl had her eyes closed.

*It’s the ghost we saw earlier. It wasn’t actually a ghost, but a living girl.*

Kazuya helped the girl up and peered into her face. His breath seized.

*She’s pretty.*

The girl had a mature and refined set of facial features. She had short blond hair. Long, sprightly arms and legs stretched out from a simple white dress. She was slim but graceful, reminiscent of a young doe. But her skin and clothes were dirty, her hands and feet were bound, and a loosened gag was stuck over her mouth.

Kazuya quickly removed the girl’s gag and untied the strings that bound her hands and feet. As he looked into her face, the girl’s eyes snapped open.

Her eyes were as blue and clear as a fine summer sky.

Tears welled up in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

The girl threw her arms around Kazuya. “Help me!”

“That’s what I came here for. You’re safe now. I got a cop with me here. But who are you? Why were you confined here? Who did this to you?”

“I’m the real Avril Bradley!” cried the blue-eyed girl—Avril Bradley. Her pretty face was scrunched up in fear.

Kazuya’s breath caught. “Really?”

“Yes!”

“Then the other Avril is an impostor...”

Kazuya recalled the sense of discomfort he occasionally felt from the fake Avril. Sometimes she was innocent and spirited, and then suddenly she would look cold, as if she were a different person. And there were times when she acted much older than how she looked.

Perhaps the innocent and spirited side she showed was her imitating the real Avril.

Victorique said that the fake Avril was the second Ciaran.

*Wait a sec... That means...*

Kazuya bolted upright. He remembered where the fake Avril—the second Ciaran—was right now.

“The library! V-Victorique!”

“What’s wrong?”

Leaving Avril to Inspector Blois, Kazuya dashed out of the storehouse.

“Kujou?”

“Ciaran went to the library! I don’t know what she’s after, but Victorique’s inside, all alone!”

Kazuya raced down the gravel path.

Meanwhile, Avril Bradley—no, the second Ciaran was running up the library’s meandering stairs, an empty suitcase in her hand.

She was breathing hard. She climbed and climbed, but she still had a long way to go to the conservatory at the top.

Finally Ciaran made it up the labyrinthine stairs. She leaned against the thin railing worked in scroll-leaf designs.

“Where is... the doll...?”

She tottered around, searching for the porcelain doll.

The luxurious doll of a girl that she hid behind the small chest earlier was not there. She swallowed.

Setting the suitcase down, she looked around in search of the doll.

“H-How?!”

She finally found the doll, crouched in the shade of the tropical trees growing in the conservatory. Only its long golden hair peeked out from between the lush greenery. Ciaran pulled its hair roughly and grabbed the doll’s thin torso.

“What’s it doing here? Did Kujou move it? Or did it try to hide from me... No way.”

Ciaran laughed at her own remark.

She opened the suitcase and tossed the doll inside.

Suddenly, she heard the sound of the library doors opening from far below. Ciaran closed the suitcase and stood up, looking down the first-floor hall over the railing.

It was Kazuya Kujou. Ciaran clicked her tongue. She grabbed the suitcase and started running down the winding stairs.

“Victorique!” Kazuya shouted as he started up the stairs.

He looked up and saw a girl with a sharp look in her eyes running down from upstairs.

Kazuya stopped, and so did she.

Cold eyes.

Abruptly the girl flashed a smile. She looked like a different person.

“Ah, Kujou.”

“Ciaran!” Kazuya snarled.

The girl’s face froze momentarily. Then, slowly, her face reverted back to its intense look.

“I guess my cover’s blown,” she said.

“I know who you are. The real Avril is already safe.”

Avril... no, Ciaran the Second clicked her tongue. “Damn right. I’m the successor to Ciaran, the great thief,” she declared. Her tone had changed drastically, crass and aggressive. “I was taken in when I was young and trained as a thief. The First suddenly disappeared eight years ago. There were rumors that he hid his stolen treasures somewhere, and when I learned that that somewhere was this academy, I came. Do you know who the first Ciaran was?”

“It was Maxim,” Kazuya answered.

Ciaran’s eyes widened in surprise. “That’s right. I was shocked when the First rolled out of the crypt as a mummy in a knight’s attire. Then I found the purple book inside. It was one of the treasures that he hid all over the academy whenever he visited during spring. It was stolen from Sir Bradley’s estate that his granddaughter inherited. I picked the book up and hid it as soon as I noticed it. By the way, where is it now?”

“Where is what? Wait, so you’re not the one who knocked me out and took the book?”

“Of course it was me. But you only had the book with you.”

“Huh?”

“Where’s the Penny Black?”

“What are you talking about?”

Ciaran glared at Kazuya. “I don’t care about the book. That’s why I left it in the flowerbeds. I was looking for the Penny Black. Oh, for the love of... You saw the postcard between the pages, didn’t you? That’s Sir Bradley’s legacy.”

Kazuya gasped. When he found the purple book, Victorique showed no interest in it. Instead she disappeared somewhere with the postcard that was used as a bookmark. Kazuya could not comprehend her actions back then.

“Not the book, but the postcard?”

“That’s right. Where did you put it?”

Ciaran came down a few steps.

“Victorique has it—”

“What are you talking about?” Ciaran said. “There’s no girl in the conservatory.”

Kazuya and Ciaran were staring each other down.

Kazuya looked confused.

“I went up there twice,” Ciaran growled. “But there was no one in the conservatory. You claimed there was a girl up there, but I didn’t see anyone.”

“Wh-What are you—”

“It’s dark, dusty, and deserted. No one has been in the conservatory for a long time. You must have seen a fairy. I told you, didn’t I? A golden fairy lives at the top of the library. You’re an international student from the Orient, a boy who can’t make friends, so he copes by studying hard instead. There’s a legend back where I’m from. Lonely children befriend fairies and get their souls taken.” She glared at Kazuya. “There was never a girl!”

Her words deeply hurt Kazuya.

What Ciaran said was true. For the first six months of his study abroad, he had not been able to fit in with the children of the aristocracy and had difficulty making new friends.

So when he met Victorique, Kazuya, as the third son of an imperial soldier, tried to suppress his unmanly feelings inside, but in truth, he was extremely happy. Victorique was strange, sometimes an enigma, and other times annoying, but she was Kazuya's first and dearest friend in Sauville.

She was real, he was sure.

"Th-That's not true!"

Ciaran scoffed. "Don't you get it yet?"

"She's real..."

Ciaran snorted. "Here. I'll show you, then. This is what your friend really is."

Wearing a cruel smile, Ciaran lifted up the suitcase. Kazuya regarded it with confusion.

She opened the suitcase.

Long golden hair spilled out.

He saw the hem of a luxurious dress.

Wide-open, glass eyes.

"Victo..."

Ciaran turned the suitcase upside-down. A small girl fell out and rolled toward Kazuya. He quickly moved to catch her, but both the luxurious goblin dress and the lace bonnet covering its silky, golden hair slipped through Kazuya's hands, and fell toward the hall far below.

Kazuya screamed as he peered down.

A pair of detectives wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps and holding hands entered the library, in pursuit of Kazuya, most likely. They looked up, and when they noticed something falling, they immediately caught the girl—no, the doll of a girl.

Kazuya watched dumbfoundedly.

"Whoa! A doll just fell," said one of the detectives.

"I think the impact broke it," the other added. "Its neck is all bent."

Kazuya turned his vacant gaze to Ciaran.

"Do you get it now?" she said with a scowl. "There's no girl in the conservatory. Only the doll. That right there was the work of Grafen Stein, a German doll maker from the last century. It's said that he made a deal with the devil to give souls to his dolls. His creations are rumored to be night-walking monsters with evil intentions. Now, then."

Ciaran tossed the suitcase aside and approached Kazuya, who was standing there stunned.

*Victorique's not real? It can't be.*

The suitcase hit the floor below and broke apart.

*It can't be. She's real. Victorique is real!*

Ciaran grabbed Kazuya by the neck and strangled him with terrible force.

“Where did you hide it? Where did you hide the Penny Black? Give it back!”

“I-I don't know... I don't know anything about it...”

“If you don't have it, who does? Give it baaack!”







Kazuya grappled with Ciaran in the middle of the labyrinthine stairs. The wooden staircase shook precariously.

Suddenly Kazuya spotted something small and golden. He squinted.

Far above, near the ceiling, there was a girl peeking her head out from between the railings.

Green eyes gleaming mysteriously. Long, magnificent golden hair that billowed and swirled in anger as if it had a mind of its own.

It was Victorique.

Opening her cherry lips, she mumbled, "If Kujou doesn't have it, then I do." Her voice was husky as an old lady's.

Ciaran shrieked and slowly turned her head. She looked up.

Victorique was lifting something with her small hands. A thick book.

"Take your hands off Kujou."

The book fell...

...and landed on Ciaran's wide-eyed face with a loud thud. With the book's cover to her face, she flailed and rolled down the stairs.

"That man is my servant," Victorique added.

Under normal circumstances, as the third son of an imperial soldier, Kazuya would have vehemently denied her remark. But he didn't hear her.

"Victorique," was all he said. "I knew you were there!"

"How rude."

Victorique exhaled sharply. Slowly, she moved away from the railing and disappeared. Her golden hair, wriggling like the tail of a small dinosaur, followed her figure of laces and frills.

"Of course I'm here!" she said.

After rolling down the wooden staircase, Ciaran the Second was arrested by Inspector Blois and taken to the village police station by the pair of hand-holding detectives.

Relieved, Kazuya slowly climbed the winding stairs, one step at a time. Finally, he reached the conservatory at the top.

He raised his head.

Victorique was sitting on the floor, turning the pages of a book in the usual manner that Kazuya had become accustomed to seeing over the past few days. She was smoking a pipe, surrounded by a circle of books.

When she noticed Kazuya coming up, she didn't even spare him a glance. She simply removed the pipe from her mouth.

“You’re late,” she said.

Her face looked the same as when they first met, imperious and expressionless, characteristic of this kingdom’s aristocracy. Kazuya found it grating.

But he didn’t let that bother him today.

He sat down next to Victorique. “What’s going on? So you’re the only one who knows everything as usual?”

“Of course. With my Wellspring of Wisdom.” Victorique sighed wearily. “It toys with the fragments of the chaos of this world to stave off my boredom, reconstructing the pieces. And thus I am once more at a loss. For the long, maddening boredom has returned.”

“Please tell me before you get bored.”

“You want me to verbalize it?” Victorique yawned loudly. “It’s too cumbersome.”

When she saw Kazuya waiting impatiently, Victorique groaned faintly. Reluctantly, she opened her mouth.

“Very well. I’ll explain it to you in a way that a simpleton can understand.”

Warm sunlight poured in on the conservatory, shining on the two of them. A spring breeze blowing in through the skylight gently ruffled their hair.

Victorique held out a card. It was a postcard from Sir Bradley to his granddaughter Avril, which was inserted in the purple book. It was not postmarked.

“Penny Black is the name of a stamp,” Victorique began. “It’s the oldest stamp in the world. That alone makes it worth a fortune, but there are a few that are even more valuable because of a printing error. That’s what’s on this postcard.”

“Oh...”

Kazuya took the postcard and studied the stamp.

“It’s a treasure that a collector would give up a fortune to have. But this legacy of Sir Bradley, left to his granddaughter, was stolen by the first Ciaran and brought to the academy in a purple book. Then subsequently laid to rest with him in the crypt.”

“I see. But how did you know that the girl I saw in that storehouse was the real Avril, held captive by Ciaran?”

“I believe Ciaran the Second used her to infiltrate the academy. She locked her up and impersonated her to find the treasure. And the reason she was hidden in the storehouse is the same reason the purple book was hidden in the library.”

Victorique puffed on her pipe. “Ciaran the Second hid the purple book on the thirteenth step of the library to exploit the horror stories rampant in this academy. Something sinister happens on the thirteenth step of the staircase. That’s why she hid the book there, because students avoid the thirteenth step.”

“Ahuh...”

“She hid the real Avril in the storehouse because there was a horror story about the ghost of Millie Marl haunting the place. She failed to consider an eccentric man like you passing by.”

Kazuya nodded admiringly. Victorique was silent for a while, smoking her pipe. Suddenly she looked at Kazuya.

“Wh-What is it?” he asked.

“A bonus. I will verbalize one more thing for you.” Her green eyes flickered mysteriously. “It’s about the story that’s given you so much trouble at school: the Springtime Reaper Brings Death to the Academy. The Reaper was, in fact, Maxim. Maxim, the first Ciaran, returned to the academy every spring. Of course, he did so to hide his stolen goods, but he must have been a creepy man. Every time he returned, there might have been deaths, including Millie Marl. The ominous impression of the Springtime Reaper was created by the first Ciaran. Most likely.”

Kazuya stared at Victorique’s cold face in amazement. It felt like watching a strange magic spell—fragments of chaos drifting in the air falling to the ground through a single glare from Victorique and reconstructed in the blink of an eye.

“You’re amazing,” he breathed.

Victorique’s expression changed faintly. She looked elated, but the slight change disappeared, overshadowed by the weariness, despair, and strange darkness on her face.

“By the way,” Kazuya finally said after a long silence.

Victorique frowned.

“You were here all along.”

Victorique lifted her head and eyed him suspiciously. “You’re still on that? Of course I was here.”

“B-But Ciaran the Second said she came to the conservatory twice and you weren’t here. She said it was dark and deserted.”

Victorique remained quiet for a while, puffing on her pipe. A wisp of white smoke rose straight up to the skylight.

A refreshing spring breeze blew past.

“Because she was a stranger,” Victorique murmured.

“What?”

“A stranger came, so I hid.”

“Hid? Where?”

Victorique tiredly lifted her head up from the book and pointed to a small chest nearby.

Kazuya stared at the chest for a while, puzzled. It was an oblong box, not large enough to hold a single person. But if they were as small as Victorique, they might fit inside by curling up.

Kazuya reached for the lid and opened it. He couldn’t believe what he saw.

Inside the chest was a lamp, some snacks, and books. The lid was designed so that it could be locked from the inside.

“You were inside this thing?” he asked.

“...”

“Do you always hide here when strangers come around?”

“...”

Victorique gave no reply.

*Maybe she’s extremely shy?*

*Wait a minute...*

“I was a stranger too the first time I came up here,” Kazuya said.

“...Yes.”

“But you were sitting here reading a book without a care in the world. And you talked to me, remember? You said: “‘Being late wasn’t enough, and now you’re skipping classes?’”

“...”

“Why didn’t you hide?”

Victorique said nothing.

Kazuya waited for a while, before giving up. “Eh, whatever.”

He sighed, then glanced at Victorique.

*Huh?*

Victorique’s face, always cold and expressionless, was red around the ear.

*Hmm?*

“What’s wrong with your ear?” Kazuya asked, puzzled.

“My ear?”

“It’s red.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It is.”

“It’s not.”

“But...”

“If I say it’s not red, then it’s not red!”

Victorique hit Kazuya on the side of the head with the book’s edge.

Clueless, Kazuya decided to keep his mouth shut.

A spring breeze whistled past the two.

Victorique’s golden hair swayed softly.

*Maybe... Kazuya mused. I brought her rare snacks so I could ask for her help...*

The wind blew.

*But maybe she was the one who chose me.*

The sun was setting.

*I’m sure you called me. So we could become friends.*

Kazuya, for some reason, felt greatly honored.

As Kazuya exited the library and started down the white gravel path, someone called for him from the distance.

“Kujou!”

It was Inspector Blois’s voice. He looked up and saw the inspector standing there, striking a pose.

“Though I’ve already solved the case, we still have a lot of work to do. Apparently Ciaran the master thief hid his treasures all over the academy.”

“I see...” Kazuya frowned when he noticed what Inspector Blois was holding under his arm. “Uh, why do you have that doll?”

“Oh, this?” Inspector Blois was holding the doll with great care. “Amazing, isn’t it?” he said proudly. “It’s the work of the genius doll maker Grafen Stein.”

“Oh...”

“This one doll is enough to build a whole mansion.”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve been looking for it for a while. I’m so glad I found it.”

Kazuya remembered that Inspector Blois was searching for something. “That thing’s yours?!” he said, appalled. “You got me so confused! Because of that doll, I... almost had a breakdown.”

The inspector looked baffled. Suddenly a crack appeared on the porcelain doll’s neck. The inspector screamed. “Nooo! The neck’s falling off!”

“It got a little roughed up earlier.”

“B-By you?”

“No. Ciaran dropped it.”

“That abominable thief...”

Kazuya walked away, leaving the trembling inspector behind.

“Avril? Oh, there you are.”

Kazuya timidly entered the infirmary.

Ms. Cecile and an old doctor from the village turned simultaneously. In bed was the real Avril, whom they had found in the storehouse earlier, munching on something. She seemed hungry.

When she heard his voice, she lifted her head and smiled brightly.

“Kujou? I got your name from Ms. Cecile. Thank you for helping me earlier.”

“It’s no big deal.”

Avril’s smile was so carefree and brimming with life that it captivated Kazuya a little.

“When I was on the train to Sauville, I got into a conversation with a woman in the same compartment, and I told her a lot about myself,” she said, munching on her food. “I told her my name, how old I was, and that I was going to study at St. Marguerite Academy. I also talked about my grandfather.”

“I see. And that woman...”

“Yeah! I mentioned the stolen item as well. I told her about the legacy that I was supposed to inherit from my grandfather, the adventurer Sir Bradley, but that was stolen a long time ago by the master thief Ciaran. I came here to study because I heard about a rumor that he hid the item somewhere here in the academy.”

Avril puffed her cheeks out in frustration. “That woman was Ciaran the Second. She’d been searching for the treasures that the First hid. She came to the academy with me and locked me in the storehouse. She then pretended to be me and infiltrated the academy.”

Suddenly her spirits lifted. “I bit the fingers on her right hand,” she said boldly. “But it made her angrier, and she rolled me around.”

Kazuya recalled Ciaran’s finger injury.

*So that was because of her bite. She’s awfully brave.*

Avril regarded Kazuya with a bright smile. “I was so scared. When you came to rescue me, I thought you looked like a black-haired prince!” She laughed.

Ms. Cecile laughed as well. “Kujou? A prince?”

“You’re laughing too much, Teach,” Kazuya grumbled.

Ms. Cecile swallowed her laughter.

“Pfft!”

Then started laughing again.

A little annoyed, Kazuya handed Avril the postcard with the Penny Black that he had received from Victorique.

Avril looked stunned for a moment, then she threw the sandwich she was eating. Ms. Cecile yelped as she caught it in the air.

With tears in her eyes, Avril took the postcard graciously.

“Grandpa!”

“I’m glad it’s back in your hands.”

“M-Me too...”

The postcard also contained a message from adventurer Sir Bradley to his granddaughter.

**You can have this. I hope you grow up to be a fantastic adventurer. You can use it to pay for your adventures. Grandpa is going to ride a balloon across the Atlantic. I’ll see you when I get back!**

Sobbing, Avril gave Kazuya a smile that shone brightly despite the tears.

“Thank you, Kujou.”

“It’s nothing...”

“I just arrived here, so I don’t know much yet. Can you show me around?”

“S-Sure.”

“I hope you’ll be my friend.”

“O-Okay...”

Kazuya didn’t mind being asked by a pretty girl to be her friend, but he felt a little worried. He was, after all, known as the Springtime Reaper, no thanks to the horror stories prevalent in the academy. He could scare Avril away.

*No, wait. Avril’s an international student, so she might not be interested in horror stories.*

Kazuya pulled himself together. “By the way, do you like horror stories?”

“I love them!” she replied immediately.

“I-I see.” Kazuya’s head dropped.

Sauville, an affluent small country in Western Europe. At St. Marguerite Academy, a prestigious school nestled in the mountains, Kazuya Kujou, an international student from a country in the Orient, meets Victorique, an odd, beautiful girl holed up in the library tower, challenging the chaos of the world.

And now Avril Bradley, the granddaughter of an adventurer, arrives.

Later they would be caught up in a sinister phenomenon involving a mysterious treasure left by the great thief Ciaran and a cursed countess, sending them scrambling through the academy.

But that is a story for another day.



## **Chapter 5: The Headless Lady Comes at 3 A.M.**

A warm spring morning.

St. Marguerite Academy.

Normally, the corridors of the school building would be filled with students who come out of their dormitories all at once, running past with textbooks in their arms, but today was Sunday, so it was empty and quiet.

A petite woman walked past a brown-tiled hall, down corridors with high ceilings and multiple beams.

Wearing large, round glasses, she had big misty eyes and a baby face framed by shoulder-length, fluffy brown hair. The woman—Ms. Cecile—was holding a bunch of keys in one hand.

“I think the textbook’s study guide is in the reading room,” she mumbled. “Why would Kujou ask me questions I don’t know the answer to? Does he think I know everything? Of course I don’t. For the record, Kujou.”

No one was around, but she continued talking rather loudly.

“When I was a student here, my grades were much worse than yours. Understand? Wait, that’s not something to be proud of.”

Shoulders sagging, she stopped in front of a room. She inserted a large key into the keyhole and turned it.

“Oh, no. The lock’s all rusty. Of course. No one’s been here for a long time that it’s earned the name the Forbidden Reading Room.”

The huge door, blackened like a laurel tree, opened. The smell of dust and moisture wafted into the hallway. The reading room was furnished with an oval tea table and bookshelves with glass doors.

Ms. Cecile hurried inside. “I’ve got to prep for Monday’s class with this study guide.”

She took one of the thin books and quickly turned to leave, when she glanced up at the wall.

She squeezed her big eyes shut.  
And opened them.  
She stared at the wall tearfully.  
Frightened, she closed her eyes once more.  
And then...

“A-A-A ghost!”

She screamed at the top of her lungs. She then took off her glasses and stamped her feet around.

Meanwhile...

In the hallway on the opposite side of the large U-shaped school building...

“Uh... that’s the bathroom where the spirit of the Sphinx quizzes you. And that’s where the spirit of the Indian elephant that was brought to the Sauvville shows up. And...”

A girl, wearing her school uniform, was walking around on a Sunday morning, peering into a notebook. She had short blond hair and bright blue eyes. Her arms and legs were long and slim, reminiscent of a young doe.

The girl, international student Avril Bradley, stopped. “Hmm... It’s hard with only a map. I barely know anything about this school. I don’t go to class until tomorrow, so I have no friends yet either. Oh, wait.”

She clapped her hands. “There’s Kujou. The oriental boy who rescued me from the abandoned storehouse. Let’s see... Where would he be? I’d like to ask him to show me around the school, but I can’t go into the boys’ dormitory...”

She let out a yelp. The floor beneath Avril’s feet shook, and she fell on her behind.

“Ow...” She glanced at her feet.

The floor had shifted in one spot, and her foot was stuck in a hole. Regarding it suspiciously, Avril pulled her foot out, and then looked into the hole.

Something was there.

Something purple and shiny.

Despite the darkness, Avril, whether out of bravery or pure recklessness, stuck her hand into the hole without hesitation. She then grabbed the purple object and pulled it out.

In her hand was a large necklace adorned with purple jewels, sparkly but somewhat sinister. Suddenly she brought her face close to the ominous and heavy necklace with wide eyes. She flipped it around, studying it.

Her breath seized.

“This is Countess Ashenden’s Poison Flower from that one story!”

She flipped through her notebook until she found the page she was looking for. She glanced at the page and then at the necklace.

“I knew it!” she exclaimed. “But what does this mean? Oh, no! What do I do? Anyway, I found something terrific. Yahoo!”

She stamped her feet around happily.

“Yaaaay!”

Meanwhile...

In a room on the second floor of the boys’ dormitory, tucked away in a corner of the campus of St. Marguerite Academy...

“Whoa! What time is it?! Did I oversleep? Oh, it’s Sunday.”

A small oriental boy bolted upright on a large mahogany bed worked with scroll-leaf designs. He had short black hair and eyes as black as ebony.

He grabbed his watch. “No, no. Sure it’s Sunday, but the third son of an imperial soldier must not indulge in idleness. He must get up immediately, wash his face, have breakfast, and then study. Man, I’m sleepy. No, no. I was already late once this week—though that was because I got involved in a murder case—and was also marked as absent for leaving through the window even though I was technically present. That’s two screwups total. Time to get up. Ah, I wanna go back to bed.”

Half-asleep, the boy, Kazuya Kujou, rose from his bed. He tied the front of this dark-blue yukata that he was using as a nightwear and moved to wash his face, when a knock came at the door.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“Me!” answered a passionate and sexy voice.

His sleepy mind wondered if it was too late to pretend to be out. The door opened.

“Morning, Kujou!” The red-haired, sexy dorm mother was standing there. “There was this creepy guy with a weird hairdo.” She paused and studied Kazuya.

“Wh-What is it?”

“That looks nice! So oriental... Can I have it?”

“What?”

The dorm mother started pulling Kazuya’s nightwear. His resistance was in vain, as the yukata was stripped away from him along with the obi. Kazuya screamed and jumped into his bed, curling inside the covers.

“That’s my nightwear!”

“Can I wear it to the village dance party?”

“No! Please give me my nightwear back...”

“I’ll return it later.” Smiling, the dorm mother waved and quickly left the room.

“What was that about a creepy guy with a weird hairdo?” he called as the doors closed.

“What? Oh, right.” The dorm mother peeked inside. “There was this young man with pointy blond hair. Such a shame too, ‘cause he was handsome. Uh, what was it again? Ah, I forgot.”

“...”

“He wants you to go somewhere.”

“The library?”

“Yeah, that’s it!” The dorm mother nodded.

She waved with a smile and closed the door.

Kazuya sighed and looked out the window.

Warm spring sunlight shone through the French windows and fell onto the carpet on the floor. A peaceful Sunday morning.

“Hmm... The library, huh?”

Kazuya squirmed out of bed. He got dressed, reluctantly.

On the mahogany desk lay a letter from his second brother that he had received last night. Kazuya folded it up and tucked it into his breast pocket, then left the dorm room.

St. Marguerite’s Grand Library.

Stone walls marked by time. Gray ivy and silence. The tube-shaped tower, one of the largest book repositories in Europe, looked as mysterious as ever on a Sunday morning, haunted by knowledge, time, and silence.

As Kazuya opened the riveted leather door and stepped into the hall, he felt the old books on the huge bookcases that filled the walls stir, as though saying, “He’s here again.”

Meandering, narrow wooden staircases led up to the ceiling far above, where majestic religious paintings looked down on the hall.

"These stairs again," Kazuya mumbled. "I still can't get used to it."

He nodded determinedly and straightened his back. Then he began ascending the labyrinthine stairs, step by step, methodically.

This was the seventh time Kazuya had taken this bizarre staircase. The first time was to deliver a handout to a classmate on top of the library at the request of his homeroom teacher, Ms. Cecile. As for the next five times...

"What did I do again?" Kazuya wondered as he climbed the stairs.

He frowned slightly as he realized that he had been repeatedly climbing the twisting stairs to see her, as if it were a daily routine or something.

"I needed her help for all those cases," he mumbled to himself as an excuse. "It's not that I want to see Victorique or anything."

After climbing the stairs for a while, Kazuya finally made it to the spacious area at the top.

A conservatory.

The morning sun shone softly through the skylight, falling on the conservatory filled with large tropical trees and garish flowers. The bored princess, odd and enigmatic, surrounded by books, was not there today, but instead a weird young man was crouched in the elevator hall in the corner, sulking.

A stylish three-piece suit and sparkling silver cuffs. A fashionable man, but with an unusual hairstyle. He had blond hair, the tip of which was fixed into the shape of a drill.

Inspector Blois was hugging his knees, mumbling something.

"Two hundred one, two hundred two, two hundred three..."

Kazuya studied the inspector cautiously. He was counting the white tiles on the floor of the elevator hall. He raised his gaze and saw Kazuya retreating uneasily.

"You're late, Kujou," he said with both joy and resentment.

"Did you need something?" Kazuya asked. "What are you doing, even?"

"There's no one around. It was boring."

"N-No one's around?"

Kazuya looked toward the conservatory. He was sure Victorique would be here. He went closer, and indeed, she was there.

Victorique, perhaps avoiding the inspector, was crouched deeper in the conservatory, doing something, just like the inspector.

A pretty red dress, fluffy like chiffon, and chic lace-up shoes. Her golden hair, long and magnificent, spilled down her back to the floor like an untied velvet turban... and covered in dirt.

“Victorique?” Kazuya called.

Victorique gave a start. She turned around. “Oh, it’s just you. The weird oriental guy... I think your name was Kujou or something.”

“That’s right. You can drop the ‘weird’ part. What the... you’re all dirty. What were you doing?”

Kazuya scuttled up to Victorique and patted down her hair, the hem of her chiffon dress, and her small hands. Victorique had apparently been playing in the dirt. Her pearly fingernails were brown with dirt. Kazuya fetched some water and dipped Victorique’s hands in it to wash her nails.

“So, Kujou,” Inspector Blois called from afar, still counting tiles. “Let’s talk about why I called you here today.”

“What is it? I’m a bit tied up at the moment.”







Inspector Blois reluctantly came closer and showed a bunch of papers. Kazuya took a glance, while Victorique ignored it and stuck her face into a large, bright-red flower.

“This is a list of the treasures that Ciaran, the master thief, is said to have stolen from all over Europe and hidden here at St. Marguerite Academy. So far, only the world’s oldest stamp, the Penny Black has been found, and returned to its rightful owner, Miss Bradley. The rest we’re absolutely clueless. My next job is finding Ciaran’s treasures.”

Kazuya looked up and regarded Inspector Blois. He knew that the inspector was talking to Victorique, not him. Victorique snubbed him, still burying her face in the flowers.

Whenever a case arose, Inspector Blois always solved it with the help of Victorique, a mysterious girl with a brilliant mind, and took all the credit. For some reason, however, Victorique and the inspector did not get along well; they never said a word to each other. When the inspector wanted to ask Victorique about a case, he sat Kazuya in the middle and pretended to talk to him.

Like he always did, the inspector directed his attention to Kazuya. “Look. First, this painting. It’s the last work of a genius painter who despised the European art world and moved to an island in the South Atlantic. It was stolen from a royal residence nearly twenty years ago. And this is Countess Ashenden’s necklace, also known as the Poison Flower. It was stolen from the National Museum in Saubreme. And then...”

The inspector showed a picture that appeared to be a reproduction of the painting, and another of a somewhat gaudy necklace that glowed purple. The inspector went on with his explanation.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” Kazuya said as he washed Victorique’s fingers. “Victorique, how long have you been playing in the dirt? Your dress and fingernails are all dirty. Didn’t your mom ever get mad at you? This dirt is kinda hard to get rid off.”

“Hmm?” Victorique finally emerged from the flowers. She frowned grimly. “Two annoying dolts.”

“Well, *sorry*. But at least you’re not bored, right?”

“Didn’t I tell you that noise is my second greatest enemy?”

“Did you?”

Inspector Blois listened closely to their exchange.

Victorique glanced up. "By the way, Kujou."

"Yes? There, all done. Your nails are finally clean."

"Are you interested in the treasures that Ciaran left behind? Would you like me to find them for you?"

Kazuya stared blankly at Victorique's small, incredibly handsome, yet intimidating face.

He shook his head. "Nope. Not at all."

Victorique nodded. "I'm not interested either."

"Right? Ugh, inspector?! Why are you strangling me?! I'm not interested in the treasures. Besides, treasure hunting is your job. How could you call someone so early on a Sunday morning for such a thing? I refuse! Ah, Victorique!"

Victorique shifted slowly like a lazy prehistoric creature, her long golden hair, like some sort of tail, swaying as she crouched down again on the ground of the conservatory.

"I just washed you clean!"

Victorique turned, sniffed audibly, and resumed playing in the dirt, ignoring Kazuya.

"Stop playing in the dirt! V-Victorique?!"

Kazuya left the library dejectedly and walked down the white gravel path.

*I still don't get her at all... Are we getting closer? Did she see me as a friend? I have no clue.*

The weather was fine and warm this morning. Laughter and light footsteps from uniformed students echoed throughout the expansive French-style garden, down the neatly-organized white fountains, hedges, and flowerbeds.

"Kujou!"

There was a cheerful voice, followed by the sound of footsteps coming closer. Kazuya turned around to see who it was. A familiar face, Avril Bradley. She was running toward him, clutching something in her hand and waving it around.

"Oh, it's you."

Avril giggled. "I finally found it. I've been looking for it for so long." She sounded ecstatic, which made Kazuya happy in turn.

“Are you feeling fine now?” he asked.

“Yeah! I’m going to class tomorrow. I can’t wait!”

Just the other day, Avril was confined by Ciaran the Second, a master thief. She was calling for help when she was rescued by Kazuya and Inspector Blois, who had rushed to the scene on Victorique’s advice. She looked very weak at the time, but now she seemed to have completely recovered.

When they first met, Avril asked him to be her friend, which overjoyed him. Now that he saw her again, he realized that she was the opposite of shy.

“I was just touring the horror spots in the school,” she said cheerfully. “You can come with me!”

“H-Horror spots?! No way!” Kazuya shrank back.

The moment he arrived, he was immediately designated as a reaper thanks to the horror stories rampant in the academy, and he was still having a hard time dealing with it. Avril, however, was oblivious to his predicament.

“Why not? It’s so much fun!” she said with a smile. “Something amazing happened just now by the way.”

Avril waved around the purple thing she was holding—a necklace, it seemed.

“Do you know the story about the Headless Lady at 3 a.m.?”

“I don’t.”

Avril pointed to one of the wooden benches scattered throughout the garden, and they sat down.

“There’s this place in the school building called the Forbidden Reading Room,” Avril said, fiddling with the purple necklace. “There’s a portrait of a lady inside. A portrait of Countess Ashenden, the dreadful poisoner who terrorized Sauvville’s high society in the Middle Ages.”

“Hmm...”

Kazuya suddenly felt drowsy. He was staring vacantly at the necklace, giving vague responses.

“Countess Ashenden always wore a necklace of purple crystal. It was called the Poison Flower. Back then, it was believed that purple crystals reacted to nearby poison and changed color. The devilish countess, who poisoned one woman after another in her quest for the king’s affection, was

afraid that she, too, would be poisoned. She had the necklace's clasp welded so it wouldn't come off her neck. Only later, when she was charged with poisoning and beheaded, did it fall off the Countess's neck."

*I think I've heard that story before.*

A golden drill briefly appeared in Kazuya's mind.

*Who told me about it again?*

"Every night since then, the headless ghost of Countess Ashenden, had been spotted walking around in this academy. The Countess wandered out of the portrait in the Forbidden Reading Room and roams about. No one knows why or how long the portrait has been hanging there. It just suddenly appeared on the wall one day. The ghost of the Countess must have come there herself, seeking a safe haven!"

"Hmm..."

"You're bored, aren't you? But I'm just getting started! Behold! I found the Countess's necklace, the Poison Flower!"

Kazuya studied the purple necklace. A look of shock crept on his face.

"Wh-Where did you find it?!"

"There's this spot on the hallway floor that got dislodged. I found it underneath. The wandering Countess must have accidentally dropped it. She doesn't have a head, after all."

"If it was under the floor, then it wasn't dropped, but hidden. I, uhh, actually saw that necklace among the list of Ciaran's stolen goods that Inspector Blois showed me."

"Kujou!" Avril jumped to her feet.

Kazuya stood up as well. "Wh-What is it?"

"Let's go to the Forbidden Reading Room!"

"The reading room? Forget that. I need to tell the inspector about this."

"We're gonna check the portrait of Countess Ashenden. If the wandering ghost dropped the necklace, it would be missing from the portrait. That would be proof that the ghost is wandering outside. Let's go!"

"Uh, no. I gotta... the inspector... the list... Ciaran..."

Avril hurried to the school building, dragging Kazuya along with her.

The large black door of the Forbidden Reading Room was open, and an adorable, soft voice was coming from inside.

"L-L-Like I said... Please listen closely. Th-This room..."

Ms. Cecile was standing in the middle of the reading room, her petite body swaying from right to left. Before her were two young men wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps, who as always, were holding hands. Inspector Blois' men.

"This room has been locked for a long time and no one has been inside. When I came in earlier, the floor was dusty and there were no footprints around. It was a locked room. But then..."

Ms. Cecile pointed to a spot on the wall, tears in her eyes.

Just then, Avril arrived, dragging Kazuya with her.

"Jackpot! It's open!" Avril exclaimed.

"I wouldn't call it the Forbidden Reading Room, then," Kazuya remarked.

Avril burst into the reading room, eyes sparkling, and cheerfully pointed to a spot on the wall.

"Look, Kujou! It's the portrait hanging over... here... Huh?"

She exchanged glances with Ms. Cecile, who was also pointing at the wall in a similar pose, eyes wide.

"Oh?" Ms. Cecile stared back at Avril with big eyes full of tears.

"Hmm?" Kazuya looked up at the wall.

There hung a portrait... not of the beautiful and wicked Countess.

Deep blue sea and a dazzling sun.

It was a landscape painting, depicting a beautiful island in the South Atlantic.

Kazuya, Avril, Ms. Cecile, and Inspector Blois's subordinates were all standing still, staring blankly at each other.

"Where's the portrait of Countess Ashenden?" Avril finally said, swinging the necklace around.

Ms. Cecile clasped her hands together. "I-It disappeared!"

"Disappeared?"

"I snuck in here early this morning to get a study... No, never mind. Anyway, I came here for something important and found the portrait of Countess Ashenden missing from the wall. Instead there's this weird painting of the sea. No one should have been here for a long time."

Kazuya looked up at the weird painting of the sea with his mouth hanging open. It seemed that he was the only one who recognized the

image.

“What a weird painting,” one of the inspector’s men said.

“I think a child painted it,” the other added.

Avril suddenly turned serious. “I think this painting looks wonderful.”

Ms. Cecile cradled her head in both hands. “What’s going on here? Who, why, how did they replace the painting? Besides, the portrait of the Countess wasn’t worth anything. No one even knows how long it had been here.”

“It’s a curse!” Avril exclaimed.

“A curse?! Nooo!” Ms. Cecile cried.

“This place is cursed!”

Ms. Cecile started panicking, while Kazuya, astonished as well, hesitantly approached the inspector’s men.

Holding hands, they turned, ready to leave the reading room at any moment. They had assumed that there was no case here.

“Uhm, detectives...?”

Both men turned at Kazuya’s voice, and inclined their heads at the same time.

“What is it?”

“Inspector Blois showed me a list of the items that Ciaran stole.”

Kazuya pointed to the painting of the sea hanging on the wall. “And one of them was this painting. It was the last work by a famous artist. I believe it’s called ‘South Atlantic’.”

“What?!”

“I don’t know why it’s here, either. And this necklace she found was also on the list. It’s called the Poison Flower.”

They exchanged looks, then took deep breaths.

“Inspectoor!”

“Pectoor!”

They bolted down the hallway, hand-in-hand.

The three people left in the reading room stood dazed for a while.

It was Avril that broke the silence. “So this is a painting of the South Atlantic Ocean,” she muttered despondently.

A faint shadow flashed across her lively, blue eyes.

Avril left the reading room and started walking down the hallway. Kazuya turned and noticed that she looked despondent. A little worried, he

followed after her hesitantly.

Avril left the school building and wandered through the gardens on the campus, eventually sitting down on the edge of a fountain. When she saw Kazuya, she smiled.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Well...” Avril thumbed the fountain’s edge. “That postcard you returned to me the other day was the last letter I received from Sir Bradley, my grandfather. He was a famous adventurer.”

“I know. I saw his name on the papers back home.”

“Really?”

Kazuya nodded.

Avril’s grandfather, Sir Bradley, was a famous adventurer. She was targeted by the master thief Ciaran because of the legacy her grandfather left for her.

Avril’s face lit up. “Grandpa was always full of energy, always looking for new adventures. All the boys in the world loved to hear about his adventures. But he was treated as an oddball in the family. My father, on the contrary, was born sickly and weak. He was very happy when I was born. He said I was just like grandpa. He told me that I was going to be a cool adventurer like him when I grew up, while my grandma beat me half to death. She wanted me to become a lovely lady.”

“Hmm...”

“My dad agreed to let me study at Sauville. He said I’m going to see the world.”

Avril seemed to be getting to the heart of the matter, so Kazuya leaned forward a bit, nodding with a serious face. This was, after all, the first time he had heard anything other than horror stories from Avril. And for some reason, he felt that if he missed this opportunity, he would never hear such a story again.

At that moment, they heard footsteps approaching. They looked up and saw two men wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps running toward them, holding hands.

“Huh?”

They let go of each other’s hands and grabbed Kazuya’s right and left hands, respectively. It seemed like all three of them were joining hands.

Kazuya’s feet rose from the ground.

“Wh-What are you doing?” he asked.

“Inspector Blois wants to see you.”

“He wanted us to bring you right away.”

“Wh-Where?”

“The library.”

Flanked from both sides, Kazuya was dragged away like a criminal.

“I’ll talk to you later, Avril!” he shouted. “I won’t be long!”

Avril laughed. “I doubt it.”

Kazuya, looking over his shoulder several times, was taken to the library.

St. Marguerite’s Grand Library.

A centuries-old temple of knowledge and serenity, made of gray stone walls.

Kicking open the leather swinging door, two men—Inspector Blois’ subordinates—tossed Kazuya inside the library.

Kazuya turned. “I’m climbing these stairs again?!” he wailed. “Once a day is my limit. Hey, are you even listening to me?”

“Hahaha!”

“Go on. Climb the stairs!”

Kazuya sighed. Steeling himself, he glanced up.

All the walls were covered by huge bookshelves, crammed with leather-bound books. Kazuya thought he sensed them groaning again at his arrival.

A narrow wooden staircase led all the way up to a ceiling adorned with majestic religious paintings. The intricate maze looked like the bones of a giant dinosaur.

Kazuya took a step up.

And then another step, and another.

*Fine... I’m sure Victorique is up there too, not just the inspector.*

The thought of Victorique hastened his steps gradually.

*I gotta say, Victorique is a strange, moody, mean, little, weird girl. She’s a jerk, and she treats me like...*

Kazuya’s pace sped up until eventually he was running up to the top of the stairs.

The top of the labyrinthine staircase.



In the conservatory, overgrown with tropical trees, bathing in the light shining through the skylight, Kazuya was greeted by another man with a golden, drill-shaped hair sticking out of his head. Inspector Grevil de Blois was waiting impatiently, pulling on leaves and whatnot, but when he noticed Kazuya, he struck a pose.

“Kujou!” he called. “I heard the mediocre portrait of Countess Ashenden disappeared from the Forbidden Reading Room and had somehow been replaced by the famous painting, the South Atlantic!”

“Y-Yeah.... I know, I was there.”

“And the Countess’s necklace, the Poison Flower, was found under the floor! What does this mean?”

Kazuya frowned. Inspector Blois was shouting so loudly, he thought his ears might explode.

He slid past the inspector and went inside the conservatory garden, and found the tiny girl—Victorique.

She was still crouched down, hunched over, playing with dirt.

“Victorique,” Kazuya called. “Oh, no. You’re covered in dirt again! Why are you like this? You’re ruining your pretty dress.”

Kazuya fetched another bucket of water, grabbed Victorique’s small hands, pulled them away from the soil, and started washing them. Victorique gave a peevish frown, but quietly let Kazuya wash her hands.

“K-Kujou. You’re not going to listen to what I have to say?” Inspector Blois huffed.

“Hmm? You got anything to share?”

Kazuya and Victorique shifted their gaze from the bucket to the inspector at the same time.

The golden drill shone amidst vivid tropical flowers.

Victorique, gaping at the inspector, slowly opened her small, cherry lips, and said only one word.

“Unicorn.”

“Huh? Oh, I see,” Kazuya said. “Now that you mention it, he *does* look like he has a horn. Quite keen of you. Inspector Blois, why is your face turning red? Are you... angry?”

Inspector Blois glared at Victorique, his lips quivering and his face crimson. Kazuya studied them both, wondering why he was that furious.

“You don’t get to say that,” the inspector grumbled. “You’re the one who came up with this style!”

“Did you say something?” Kazuya asked.

“N-Nothing!”

While the inspector had Kazuya’s attention, Victorique returned to playing in the dirt, soiling her clean hands once again. Before Kazuya could say something, Victorique interrupted him.

“Kujou, don’t you have to write a reply?” she said in a low, husky voice.

Kazuya shut his mouth and stared at Victorique blankly. “A reply?” He slammed his fist onto his hand. “Ah, right. I received a letter from my brother yesterday. But how do you know about that?”

Victorique yawned boredly. Her red chiffon dress shifted and rustled as she moved. Bringing her small, dirty hand near her mouth caused dirt to stick to her rosy cheeks, so Kazuya quickly got out a handkerchief and wiped her face. Victorique swatted away the handkerchief as though it were an annoying fly.

“Elementary,” she said. “I don’t even need to use the Wellspring of Wisdom. The letter is peeking out of your breast pocket.”

Kazuya glanced at his breast pocket. He *did* put it in there when he left his room this morning.

“The fact that you’re carrying the letter with you means either you still haven’t read it, or you’re wondering what to write as a reply. Thus the fragments of chaos are reconstructed. In other words, the letter is giving you trouble.”

“Wow,” Kazuya uttered. “You’re weird, but you sure are smart!”

Victorique grunted.

“You’re right. This letter is actually giving me trouble. I got it last night, and it’s been bugging me...”

“Quit babbling and show it to me.”

As Kazuya took the letter from his breast pocket and opened it, a golden drill peeked out from behind a palm leaf.

“Hey, me first! This is not fair!”

“The unicorn’s mad,” Kazuya said.

“Leave him be. Now, show it to me quick.”

“O-Okay...”

Kazuya opened the letter and handed it to Victorique. She started reading it, murmuring to herself.

The letter was written in slightly broken English. At home, his second brother was a laid-back guy who did nothing but invent random things, but outside, he was a level-headed man working for the government. Apparently, he wrote the letter in English to improve his skills. The letter contained an innocuous update on the present state of things, such as the well-being of his family, how one of the trees in the garden had died, and that this winter had been quite cold.

At the end of the letter was a shoddy ink drawing of what looked like a rose, with an image of a woman below it.

Next to the image were small letters: **Don't tell anyone.**

Kazuya stared at Victorique's small face. He thought that Victorique must have been overwhelmed by the incomprehensible picture and message. But then she chuckled.

Kazuya jumped in surprise. Victorique, sharp-tongued and never smiling, suddenly beamed. She looked incredibly cute that Kazuya's heart started pounding in his chest.

"Wh-What's wrong?" he asked.

"Hmm? Your brother just made me laugh a little."

"Was there anything funny in the letter?"

Kazuya studied the letter. He read it over and over, then shook his head, completely clueless.

"What do you mean? The picture made you laugh? I have no idea what he's telling me. What is he referring to with this 'don't tell anyone' part?"

Victorique pursed her glossy, cherry lips and moved them close to Kazuya's ear. Her cool breath brushed his face, and he blushed a little.

"Your brother has a secret girlfriend!" she whispered in her husky voice.

"What?! A girlfriend?!" Kazuya screamed.

"That's right. And the only one he shared the news with is his youngest brother who's studying abroad."

"My brother has a girlfriend?! No way! All he does is tinker with stuff all day! He eats a lot, though."

Kazuya grabbed the letter and read it over and over again, moving it closer to his face and then away again. But there was no mention of a girlfriend.

Kazuya gave up and lifted his gaze from the letter, waiting patiently for Victorique to explain.

A wind blew through the skylight, rustling the palm leaves.

Victorique had forgotten all about Kazuya and resumed playing in the dirt to her heart's content. After a while, she washed her small hands in the bucket, and looked up.

"Handkerchief," she said.

"Okay, but you better explain it to me."

"Explain?" Victorique looked at Kazuya curiously. She wiped her tiny hands with the handkerchief. "Explain what?"

"My brother's secret girlfriend!"

"Oh... You still don't get it? You are so dumb. You must lead a tough life."

"Oh, get off my case! Explain it, quick."

Victorique sighed wearily. Reluctantly she began to explain what was written on the letter.

"Listen close."

"I'm listening."

"First, the letter is written in English. And there is an image of a woman under a rose. In English, 'under a rose' means a secret."

"I see..."

"Your brother has a secret woman. And you must not tell anyone about it. He must be embarrassed. Do you get it now?"

Kazuya nodded in admiration. "I hundred-percent got it. I'm surprised you noticed, though."

"Wha—?"

Kazuya meant it as a compliment, but Victorique frowned as though he had just insulted her.

"K-Kujou," she growled. "Who do you think I am? There is nothing I don't know. This does not even count as a mystery."

"Hmm...?" Kazuya observed her as her rosy cheeks turned bright red. "That reminds me, my brother has always been into riddles. He's so shy around women that he fainted when my sister hugged him. He's incredibly smart, though. He was so brilliant in college, he surprised even his math professor. And his hobby is inventing things. Oh, yeah. His job aside, he said he was the best riddle solver in the world." He laughed.

“What did you say?”

Kazuya jumped. His casual remark caused Victorique’s lovely eyebrow to rise even higher.

“V-Victorique? What’s wrong?”

“*Your* brother dares to claim he’s the best in the world?”

“Wh-Why are you emphasizing me?”

Victorique’s fists were shaking. Suddenly she let out a weird-sounding yelp. She rolled out of the conservatory, her frilly petticoat and puffy bloomers stirring past the gaping Kazuya.

“Uhm, where are you going?”

The red shape wrapped in a chiffon dress rolled back to Kazuya. She was holding a writing paper, a quill pen, and an inkwell.

“Oh, you’re back.”

Kazuya studied her, wondering what she was up to. Face red, Victorique unfolded the paper and suddenly started drawing a picture of a white horse.

“You’re drawing?”

“...”

“Man, I really don’t get you. Are you drawing a horse? Haha. You suck. Ow! Why did you pinch me?! It’s bruising!”

“This is not a drawing. It’s a challenge to your stupid brother.”

“He’s not stupid. He’s... Wait, a challenge?” Kazuya blinked.

Then he took a closer look at the picture Victorique had drawn.

It was a picture of a white horse on a mountain summit. Kazuya recognized it. A huge white horse drawn in ancient times on a mountain in Berkshire, England, quite famous as a tourist attraction.

“And what’s this one?”

Victorique was drawing a different picture. Kazuya studied it.

It was a funny-looking picture of a donkey. It looked awful.





“What’s up with this drawing? Hmm? What are you drawing this time?”

“Shut up. Don’t interrupt me.”

“H-How am I interrupting?!”

Ignoring Kazuya’s whining, Victorique focused on writing a message in English under the drawing.

Kazuya read it aloud. “Let’s see here... ‘Rearrange this awful drawing of a donkey and transform it into this beautiful colt. Do it in five minutes. That’s an order. From Victorique.’ Is this a riddle? Fine by me, I doubt he knows who Victorique is. Why are you glaring at me? Tsk. Fine.”

Kazuya gave in. He took the letter from Victorique and added his own message for his brother in the corner.

He was fine, that there was nothing new. That his brother’s secret was safe with him. And that he made friends with a little girl who was very smart. She wanted his brother to solve a riddle, so he included that in the reply.

Victorique nodded in satisfaction. Kazuya sighed inwardly. *She’s so childish. And competitive too.*

Victorique looked completely composed, sitting in a small but graceful pose, like a noblewoman. Slowly, she lifted a white ceramic pipe, lit it, brought it close to her tiny lips, and took a puff.

“So about the portrait of Countess Ashenden,” she said all of a sudden.

“You remembered!” Inspector Blois cried, poking his drill-shaped hair toward them.

A much-brighter sunlight was streaming through the skylight, shining on the verdant foliage in the conservatory. A spring breeze rustled the trees and flowers.

A wisp of white smoke rose from the ceramic pipe in Victorique’s mouth.

Kazuya was standing next to Inspector Blois, waiting with bated breath for Victorique’s next words.

“Kujou, do you understand Latin?”

“Nope.”

Inspector Blois scowled and waved his drill from side to side.

“There’s this Latin word ‘pentimento’. The literal translation is ‘to repent’. Of course, Latin is no longer used in everyday conversation. Only a few places still use the word in its original meaning. But words are



sometimes given other meanings, allowing them to survive longer. Even if the rose disappears from the earth for some reason, the expression ‘under the rose’ will live on. As a descendant of the rose. It’s the same thing.”

“Y-You kinda lost me there.”

“The Latin word ‘pentimento’ lives on today as an art term, derived from when a painter regrets something. Sometimes a painter will paint over a work they consider a failure. Or when they want to hide the original painting.”

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth and turned around, slowly and languidly.

Kazuya marveled at her pale green eyes, tinged with a deep ennui that he had never seen before. Her face was devoid of expression. It was as if she was a different person from the one earlier, childish and red with anger. Her green eyes, reminiscent of glass beads, were motionless, like those of a taxidermied rare creature that had gone extinct. They had the power to make people shudder. For some reason, Kazuya could not take his eyes off her; he felt like he was being stared down by a gigantic ferocious beast.

“Sometimes the painting painted over a previous work fades and vanishes over the years, and the original painting suddenly reappears. This phenomenon is called ‘pentimento’.”

Astonished, Kazuya and Inspector Blois exchanged glances.

“Wait, so what does that mean?”

“No one replaced the painting on the wall of the Forbidden Reading Room. Someone painted an awful portrait on top of the famous painting ‘South Atlantic’ to hide it. The paint has simply vanished and the original masterpiece reemerged.”

“Someone? Who?”

Victorique gave Kazuya a peeved look. She sniffed audibly, then continued in her usual, unbearable arrogance.

“Ciaran, who else? It was Ciaran who stole both the ‘South Atlantic’ and Countess Ashenden’s necklace, the Poison Flower. When he hid the masterpiece in the academy, he came up with the idea of painting over it, using the owner of the necklace, which he also hid here, as inspiration. That is the secret of the painting in the reading room, which no one knew when it got there.”

Stillness filled the conservatory.

Bright sunlight poured in through the skylight.

Palm leaves stirred in the gentle spring breeze.

A wisp of white smoke slowly drifted from Victorique's ceramic pipe.

For a while, no one said a word. Kazuya just gawked at Victorique's pretty little face. Victorique herself was silent, wearing a composed look.

Inspector Blois, who looked the most surprised of all, finally regained his composure. "Time to go," he said.

Slowly he turned his back on the conservatory and hurried to the hydraulic elevator, as if running away.

Kazuya snapped back to his senses. "Inspector! Are you leaving again after borrowing Victorique's wisdom and pretending you didn't? You will thank her this time, Inspector."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Inspector Blois mumbled. "I simply came here to talk to you."

Kazuya had heard the same excuse over and over.

"Grevil," Victorique suddenly said in her husky voice.

Inspector Blois gave a start and shot Victorique a glare.

"Wh-What is it? I'm busy. I have to find the treasures that Ciaran hid all over the academy. If you'll excuse me."

"I'm afraid you won't find this one, no matter how hard you search."

Victorique took a small cloth bag from somewhere and hurled it at Inspector Blois. Despite the huge wind-up, the bag failed to maintain altitude and crashed to the floor less than a meter away from her. Kazuya reluctantly picked it up, walked over to Inspector Blois, and handed it to him.

It was a small bag embroidered with flowers. Inspector Blois stared at it for a while, flummoxed. Then he gasped, took out the list of Ciaran's stolen goods, and compared it with the bag. Kazuya checked the list as well.

Among the list was a picture that looked exactly like the one on the cloth bag that Victorique handed over. Seeds of a rare flower found in a remote part of South America by a famous plant hunter.

Inspector Blois quickly opened the bag and looked inside. He turned it upside-down and shook it. Nothing came out.

"It's empty!" Inspector Blois shouted.

He turned to see the mysterious, beautiful girl staring at him with unmoving green eyes from inside the conservatory.

“What happened to the seeds?” the inspector demanded.

“...I ate them.”

“Y-Y-You what?! Are you a squirrel or something?! Tell me you’re lying!”

“I’m not. It was quite good. My worst enemy is boredom. A different meal does well to provide some thrill.”

Victorique gave a satisfied nod, and turned her back. The wisp of white smoke from her pipe wobbled. She must be trembling from trying to hold back laughter.

*Clang, clang.*

The elevator’s steel cage started descending. Kazuya’s eyes darted between them both, until Inspector Blois’ face, contorted in frustration, disappeared from his view.

Kazuya trotted back to the conservatory.

“Did you really eat those valuable seeds? Is your stomach okay?”

“...”

Victorique did not even look up; she simply responded with a snort. Kazuya remained silent for a while with a startled look on his face.

Then he broke into laughter. “Did you see the inspector’s face?!”

“Kujou... do you like pretty flowers?”

“Flowers?” He thought about it for a bit. “I do. Back home, my mother used to take care of the garden. It was quite beautiful, with all kinds of flowers blooming depending on the season. But this conservatory is pretty nice, too. What about you?”

No reply. Only a sniff.

Kazuya looked baffled, not sure where this abrupt topic came from. He was beginning to worry that his presence here was unwanted.

*The case is closed, so there’s no reason to come here... anymore...*

Ignoring everything around her, Victorique started reading, flipping through several books at the same time at great speed. Kazuya felt sad to have to leave this weird, tiny girl.

*I can’t keep climbing those stairs every single day. I wonder if I will ever see this mysterious girl again. Man...*

“Kujou,” Victorique said without lifting her head from the book. “In about ten days.”

“Hmm? What’s wrong? Your face looks a little red.”

“I-I-It doesn’t! In ten days!”

“It definitely does... What’s in ten days?”

“Um... Come here then.”

Kazuya’s face went blank, then lit up. “Are you sure?!”

“Come back in about ten days and look around that area.”

“Which area?”

Kazuya looked curiously in the direction Victorique was pointing, toward the soil in the conservatory where Victorique had been playing all morning.

Victorique blew her pipe. “In about ten days, rare tropical flowers will bloom there. You may come and see them.”

Kazuya gasped. “So you planted the seeds?!”

“I-I didn’t notice. I saw the bag on the floor, so I planted them. Then the list came later.”

Face crimson, Victorique swung her small hands around. Kazuya stood dumbfounded, while Victorique continued making excuses. Eventually she went quiet and cupped her crimson cheeks.

Palm leaves shook.

A spring breeze blew gently, stirring the smoke from Victorique’s pipe.

“So I can come back then?” Kazuya asked, a little happy. “I thought you found me noisy and annoying.”

Victorique only sniffed sharply in response.

Kazuya’s face was growing brighter by the second. Victorique shot him a glance, and frowned deeply. She opened her mouth to say something.

But the usual harsh insults in her husky voice did not come out of her cherry lips. She closed her mouth and sniffed again.

A breeze blew through the skylight and ruffled Victorique’s magnificent golden hair that looked like an untied velvet turban. Palm leaves rustled.

Kazuya turned around to leave the conservatory. Placing his hand on the railing adorned with scroll-leaves, he glanced over his shoulder. An illusion flashed in his eyes momentarily.

One day, in this mysterious conservatory located at the top of the gray tower, rare exotic flowers would sprout and bloom radiantly. The wind from

the skylight ruffled the strange flowers. And watching them was a small, strange girl named Victorique, a peculiar, exotic flower herself, with him by her side.

Like a gardener watching over a mysterious flower, Kazuya gazed at Victorique, sitting with her luxurious ruffles spread out like colorful petals.

While Kazuya gaped at the momentary mirage, Victorique glanced up. Their eyes met.

Holding his breath, Kazuya continued staring in wonder at Victorique. She regarded him curiously, and then, with an extremely weary sigh, she said, "I'm always here. If you need me, just climb those winding stairs."

A warm spring breeze blew across the campus, stirring the grass on the lawns and the blooming flowers in the flowerbeds.

Kazuya left the library and walked along the white gravel path, eventually stopping in front of the school building. Inspector Blois' two men were just leaving, one carrying Countess Ashenden's necklace, the Poison Flower, and the other the famous painting, the 'South Atlantic'.

Avril Bradley, an international student from England, watched them go regretfully. As Kazuya approached from behind, he noticed that Avril was staring not at the sparkling necklace, but at the large painting.

"I always thought girls liked jewelry more than painting," he said.

Startled, Avril whirled around. When she saw Kazuya, she smiled.

She pointed her long, graceful arm to the painting. "That painting is of the South Atlantic Ocean, right? It's so beautiful! Actually, my grandfather is no longer around."

"Oh..." Kazuya breathed as he walked alongside Avril.

Kazuya had also read about Sir Bradley's last moments in the newspapers back home. After turning sixty, the famous adventurer took a balloon ride one day, and...

"He went on a transatlantic adventure trip in a balloon and disappeared. People said he was reckless and growing senile. But when I saw that painting, it looked so beautiful."

Avril smiled forlornly. Tears welled up in her big blue eyes. Kazuya quickly handed her a handkerchief. She wiped her tears with it, blew her nose, and returned it back to him.

“His balloon disappeared into the sea, but I have this feeling that he saw a beautiful blue sea in his last moments. A paradise.” She gave a dry chuckle.

“I don’t know what to say...”

Kazuya put the handkerchief back in his hip pocket. *I’ll wash it later.*

A sweet and fresh fragrance wafted from the flowers in the flowerbeds. Their shoes clacked along the gravel path.

Avril flashed a smile as bright as a blooming flower. “I want to go on an adventure like my grandfather, travel as far as I can. Your country must be a very wonderful place too. I want to go there someday.”

“I’ve never heard anyone say that before. The students at this academy seem to think that countries across the sea are terrifying, uncivilized places. They even call me the Reaper.”

“Really?”

“Oh, you didn’t know that yet? Crap.” Kazuya frowned.

Avril chuckled. “I suppose people find the unknown creepy. Especially Sauvillian girls of noble descent. But I love it. New countries, new cultures. There are always exciting discoveries to be made there. I’m sure what’s on the other side of Europe is fantastic.”

Kazuya was thinking of another girl. A girl of noble descent in Sauville.

“One day,” Avril said.

The small, bizarre, rude, enigmatic girl who never stepped out of the mysterious conservatory at the top of the library tower, let alone Sauville.

“One day, I will travel somewhere far away.”

Kazuya’s mind was somewhere else. *Victorique...*

Victorique, wrapped in a dress as magnificent as flower petals. Victorique with a stunning intellect.

“Kujou, are you listening?” Avril frowned.

Kazuya snapped back to reality. “Huh? Uh, yeah.”

Avril smiled once more.

A stronger wind blew.

A still-chilly spring breeze.

Soft sunlight fell on the campus, gently shining on Kazuya’s black hair.

A few weeks later, Avril Bradley, an international student who loves horror stories, tells Kujou Kazuya about the mystery of the ghost ship

Queen Berry. Victorique and Kazuya become embroiled in a bizarre case involving the ship, and a great adventure unfolds.

Their second adventure is a case involving a hidden settlement in the mountains called the “Nameless Village” where they learn the secret to Victorique’s birth.

Their third adventure is the mass disappearance in the capital of Saubreme, in which Kazuya was involved.

Together Victorique and Kazuya would go through adventure after adventure over the next several months.

Letting their feelings ride upon the winds, the seasons change from spring to summer.

The academy is about to enter a long summer break.

On the first day of the summer vacation, Kazuya received a letter from his brother. It contained the answer to the ‘colt puzzle’ that Victorique had given, as well as a new riddle that he challenged Victorique to solve.

Summer memories intertwine—Victorique’s, Kazuya’s, and another girl’s.

But that, too, is a story for another day.

## Chapter 6: The Reaper Finds a Golden Flower

Winter, 1922.

The setting sun cast dark shadows on the curtained windows of the ancient castle.

The pale moon rising in the western sky made the huge stone structure—the de Blois family’s towering spires, the windows, the extravagant entryway—stand out like a huge woodblock print of black and white.

Winters in Western Europe were cold. Especially in an old stone castle that had stood since the Middle Ages, tucked away deep in the woods.

The gardens surrounding the castle, beautifully trimmed by skilled gardeners brought in from the capital Saubreme, was merely a shadow of its former self in the cold season. Dreary twilight blanketed the copper-colored beech branches and rose saplings shivering anxiously under the snow.

Encroaching darkness, and the chill of winter...

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A group of servants—young maids in blue-and-white uniforms, a tall elderly butler, a young male servant in a stylish uniform, a female cook of large build—from all over the castle fell in outside, their hands clasped together in front of their chests, huddled close in fear. They were all staring up at a particular spot.

The de Blois castle. In its corner stood a long, narrow, sinister tower. There were many legends revolving the ancient castle, and the tower in particular, was said to have been the stage for many a tragedies and conspiracies during the warring period in the Middle Ages.

Everyone was watching the tower with bated breath and stiff faces.

At this very moment, something was being slowly taken out and loaded onto a large carriage waiting below.

It was square, like a cage.

No, it *was* a cage.



Covered in a Persian-style cloth, a mixture of cream and green, it was slowly lowered from the top of the tower. There seemed to be a beast inside; growls came from within every now and then.

A snowy wind blew past.

The cage rattled.

Terrified, the crowd of servants took a step back.

A beast's mournful cry echoed through the air.

It was coming from the cage. With every gust of the wintry wind, the animal in the cage, hidden by the Persian cloth, howled in sorrow and pain into the night sky.

One maid—a young girl with red cheeks, called a maid-in-waiting—was about to run to the rocking cage, but a large, older cleaning woman held her back.

“Don’t,” the woman said. “You don’t need to involve yourself with that anymore.”

“But...”

“It’s over.” Her big, plump body swayed.

The old butler approached with a wrinkly frown. “Don’t do anything stupid. It will be gone soon.”

“But...”

“That beast will be gone, and peace will return to this place.”

The other servants all nodded. The maid-in-waiting looked at the cage, tears in her eyes.

The cage had just been lowered into the back of the large black carriage. Scared perhaps by the vibrations, whatever was inside went silent.

The driver, his face stiff, nodded.

He cracked his black whip. The ominous black horses whinnied shrilly, rearing in surprise, and took off along the graveled road.

The large black carriage, carrying an ominous cage wrapped in Persian cloth, drove away from Castle de Blois into the forest.

The servants all breathed a sigh of relief. One by one they left the yard and returned to their posts. The cleaning lady tapped the maid-in-waiting on the shoulder before walking off.

“Why?” the young girl muttered, all alone.

Slowly she walked, back to her new post. She had a new job starting tonight. She needed to learn the ropes. There was no time for sentimentality.

She had a young brother and sister to support. She had to work.

“But...”

She stopped, and looked up at the long, now-empty sinister tower.

Her days of carrying three things up to that room at the top of the tower were over.

“That Gray Wolf was human,” she mumbled as she walked away.

A biting wind blew.

Powdery snow fluttered, drowning out the girl’s voice.

“A terrifying human being.”

One winter morning.

St. Marguerite Academy.

It was the morning after the night when the sinister cage was loaded on a carriage, back in the chilly garden of Castle de Blois, surrounded by a dark forest since the Middle Ages, and taken away into the woods.

St. Marguerite Academy, too, had remained unchanged since the Middle Ages, a spacious, old and prestigious school for the children of nobility, nestled in the gentle slopes of the mountains, near a village at the foot of the Alps. On this particular morning, a young teacher was sitting nervously, having welcomed an unusual guest.

On the first floor of the U-shaped school building, in a guest room decorated with luxurious furnishings for aristocrats, located furthest from the windows, a middle-aged man was sitting in a luxurious, delicate chair carved with scroll leaves, while a young woman sat in a plain staff chair. They were facing each other in silence.

The woman wore huge round glasses over her large, brown droopy eyes. Shoulder-length, dark-brown hair framed a baby face that could get her mistaken as a student.

The female teacher’s name was Cecile. She was a student at this academy a few years ago. Although young and inexperienced, she was quite popular among the students.

For a while now, she had been staring wide-eyed in fear at the most sinister and beautiful man she had ever seen sitting in the corner of the room, dark despite it being morning.

Sitting on the intricate chair was a nobleman, his glittering golden hair tied back like a horse’s tail, wearing a tunic and tight-fitting riding trousers.

He was holding a riding whip in his hand. Marquis de Blois. He lived up to his reputation. A mysterious and fearsome man regarded as the most powerful and influential politician among the nobility, said to have played a major role in the last Great War.

Marquis de Blois wore a strong monocle over his right eye that ruined his extraordinary features. Oddly-shaped, it was adorned with several silver ornaments. The thick lens magnified his sinister green eyes bizarrely, eyes that seemed to loom over Cecile like a ghost as she sat there, too frightened to speak.

The distinguished and wicked man eventually opened his mouth. “Young lady.” His magnified eye narrowed slightly.

“S-Sir,” Cecile replied nervously.

“Have you ever owned an animal before?”

“An animal, sir?” Cecile dug through the memories of her younger days. “Um, I had a dog, a bird, and a snake I picked up. The last one my dad told me to throw away because my mom fainted. And a cat too. And then...” She started counting off her fingers.

“Good enough,” an annoyed voice cut her off.

“Huh?”

“I need you to take care of a wolf.”

Cecile looked puzzled. “A-A wolf?”

Marquis de Blois chuckled. “Yes.” The green eyes behind his glasses suddenly widened. “A tiny, tiny Gray Wolf.” He pointed to the papers in Cecile’s hand. “I’m talking about the girl.”

Cecile’s breath caught, and she looked at the papers.

It was a new student’s documents that had arrived last night. She had already read it, of course. It contained a detailed description of a twelve-year-old girl, Marquis de Blois’ illegitimate child. The youngest child of the Blois family, Victorique de Blois. She had apparently never attended school before, which wasn’t unusual for the children of the aristocracy, who were often educated by a full-time tutor.

The problem was she was brought in last night, so no one had seen the girl yet. No pictures were included with the documents either. Cecile wondered what kind of a girl she was.

“You can only carry a joke too far, sir,” Cecile protested.

Marquis de Blois’s eyes narrowed in surprise. “What did you say?”

“You can’t speak of your daughter as if she were an animal. It’s not nice.” She sounded indignant.

“Oh?” The Marquis snickered, and stood up. “I don’t care what you think.” He was oozing a peculiar and ominous aura that pulled Cecile out of her seat and caused her to retreat in fright.

The Marquis grinned. He brought his face close to Cecile’s. “You work as a professional now, but you were once the daughter of a nobleman. That is why I decided to have you take care of her. My daughter is a beast. A legendary beast. If you value your life, do not defy me.”

“Y-You can’t threaten me—”

“Make no mistake. It is not my wrath that will shorten your life. My daughter is a beast. If you don’t want your throat ripped out, don’t do anything foolish. Provide her the minimal care she needs and keep a safe distance from her.”

“Wh-What?”

“Stay away from that thing. And don’t let anyone near it. It’s dangerous. Listen.”

Marquis de Blois’ eyes narrowed in fear. But his thin, pale lips were smiling, as if he were having a good time.

“The beasts are howling!”

It was a nice, sunny winter morning, but the sky was growing darker and darker. Somewhere, a dog was whimpering anxiously. Birds all took off at once, as if startled by something, their wings flapping ominously.

“They’ve noticed its arrival.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“Her. The beast. Yes, and like these animals this morning, it will be a long time before the world notices its existence. And then like a flock of frightened birds, those stupid people from the New World will fly away from Europe!”

“S-Sir?” Cecile was watching him in terror.

The guest room regained its silence. Coming back to his senses, the Marquis cast his gaze down. Then he brought his beautiful, ashen face close to Cecile’s round glasses.

“There are three things she must never run out of. When she was in the tower, I had a maid deliver them to her. But from today onwards, that will be your job.”

“Wh-What three things?”

“The first one...” Marquis narrowed his eyes.

Birds took off somewhere. It was a strange morning, as if all the animals in the school were running away, as though nature itself was in an uproar.

“The first one is books,” the Marquis whispered.

Once Marquis de Blois left, the academy regained its former bright, refreshing, winter morning. The sun now shone through the French windows of the dark guest room, and birds chirped in the distance.

“...Phew.” Ms. Cecile let out a deep sigh. The tension had drained from her, and a smile returned to her baby face. “Gosh. Since he was famous and all, I was wondering what kind of person he was. I didn’t expect him to be sooo terrifying!”

She gathered the documents and left the room.

Students were walking down the morning hallways. Children of nobility greeted Cecile politely but cheerfully as they passed by. Cecile replied with a smile, but looked down at her feet from time to time uneasily.

*What kind of a girl is she that her own father calls her a wolf?*

Cecile would learn the answer to that question soon.

The academy’s expansive campus was beautifully landscaped in the manner of a French-style garden. Trimmed lawns, delicately adorned fountain, spacious flowerbeds. Squirrels that climbed the benches and gazebos during spring were nowhere to be found; they were currently hibernating in a distant forest.

Deep inside the gardens stood a small building that was built only months ago.

It was a colorful, yet somehow peculiar building, like a candy house from a fairy tale. The first and second floors were connected by an iron spiral staircase. Everything in this tiny building was a little too small for human habitation, as though scaled down through precise calculations.

Cecile stood in the small doorway and gently grabbed the doorknob, a fragrant color reminiscent of freshly baked muffins. It was cold, holding the chill of winter. With a soft cry, Cecile turned the cold doorknob and stepped inside.

The candy house—a special dormitory for the girl that was quickly built at the request of the de Blois family—was filled with a stifling darkness that

made the school building's guest room seem bright. It was as if a heavy black cloth blanketed the entire place, slowly suffocating anyone within. Cecile swallowed, and slowly stepped into the darkness.

The house was full of pretty furnishings, all of which seemed to have been slightly reduced in size. A tiny drawer with shiny enameled ornaments. Green, cabriole-legged table covered with a lovely embroidered tablecloth, overflowing with small silverware. A rocking chair by the window. But the youngest daughter of Marquis de Blois, the resident of this small, special dormitory—Victorique de Blois—was nowhere to be seen.

The darkness stirred.

Noticing the intruder, the darkness turned and stared at Cecile. It closed in to swallow her. Paralyzed from fear, Cecile narrowed her brown eyes and noticed something deeper inside.

It didn't fit this lovely room. A jarring dissonance.

A large pile of books.

Thick leather-bound books were stacked all over the place. A suffocating space of knowledge. All of the books were extremely difficult—religious texts written in Latin, mathematics, chemistry, history—that even Cecile, a teacher, would shrink back.

Marquis de Blois's ominous voice rang in Cecile's ears.

***“The first one is books!”***

The daughter of the Marquis must be in the depths of this darkness. Cecile gulped, and took a bold step forward, into the shadows.







There was a crunch under her foot.

Cecile slowly lifted her foot, then crouched down and studied what she had stepped on. She frowned.

A delicious-looking macaroon, sprinkled with a hefty amount of cinnamon powder.

Cecile shot an inquiring look at the darkness.

Macaroons, chocolate bonbons, and animal-shaped candy bars were scattered all over the floor, surrounding something in the shadows. As Cecile stood up, Marquis de Blois' voice replayed in her mind.

***“The second one is sweet snacks!”***

“And third...”

“Ruffles!” Cecile blurted as she stepped into the dark.

Beyond the darkness was even more darkness. Cecile sensed the presence of a negative force, the same as that of the Marquis—no, even stronger than what that small fry emitted. Fear seized her throat. Before her lay real, thick darkness, as though an entrance to the underworld had opened there.

Cecile's trembling legs stopped.

Whatever was in the shadows was staring up at her.

She closed her eyes. Strained her ears. She could hear the faint rustling of clothes. It noticed Cecile and started moving, slowly. Something had briefly popped into her field of vision earlier. A terrifying creature, as Marquis Blois had said.

It was pure-white, wrapped in layers and layers of luxurious ruffles.

Cecile slowly opened her eyes.

It was right in front of her. Her breath caught.

Cecile forgot everything in an instant. The bizarre darkness, that it was the youngest daughter of Marquis de Blois that was before her, that she was a Gray Wolf, a legendary creature talked about in this kingdom since the Middle Ages.

Sitting in front of her, looking up at her with long-slitted, pale green eyes was a magnificent porcelain doll.

Her silky golden hair cascaded down to the floor like an untied velvet turban, creating a glittering waterfall. Small rosy cheeks. Emerald eyes that sparkled like precious jewels. A luxurious dress of jet-black French lace and

three layers of white ruffles. On her small head sat a miniature hat with a coral ornament that looked like a crown.

The doll, or rather the little girl who *looked* like a doll, was sprawled on the floor like a discarded toy, her face completely devoid of emotion. Her little feet in laced shoes moved briefly, then stopped again.

The girl—Victorique de Blois—was watching Cecile with her wide green eyes.

Cecile tried to open her mouth, but her throat was too dry to speak.

Moments passed.

Eventually, the girl opened her small cherry lips with an abrupt, unnatural movement, like a puppet controlled by a master.

“Who might you be?”

Cecile gasped. Her voice was astonishingly different from what her lovely appearance might suggest. It was low, husky, and mournful, like an old woman’s.

But her peculiar voice seemed oddly congruent with the mysterious light in the girl’s green eyes—eyes that were quiet and melancholic, like an old-timer who had lived a hundred years. A feeling of awe gripped Cecile. Victorique shifted a little, and like a critter instinctively sensing a prey nearby, Cecile’s heart shrank. Fear washed over her once more.

“Are you a foe?” asked the husky voice.

Layers of white ruffles rustled in irritation at Cecile’s inability to answer out of fear.

Cecile shook her head frantically. She couldn’t speak.

When she finally regained her voice, she mumbled, “A-A doll?”

Victorique’s eyes glinted dangerously, turning greener with rage. “How rude!”

“Uhm...”

“My name is Victorique de Blois. A living human being.”

“Uh, yes. Um—”

Victorique lifted a thick book in her small hands and threw it at her. Cecile yelped as she crouched down. The book hit the wall and fell to the floor with a loud thud.

It was quiet.

Victorique’s small body quivered, and she roared like a beast. A roar that drowned out Cecile’s shrill scream. Seconds later, Cecile was able to make

out what the girl was saying.

“I’m bored!”

“Wh-Why?”

“I’ve read all the books here. It’s not enough. More. Bring me more. More books. I’m bored. I’m bored!”

Turning her back on the horrifying girl, Cecile bolted away. Her legs got tangled up as she leapt from the darkness and fled the dollhouse.

When she fearfully turned around, the roar had ceased, and there was only a lonesome, cute little candy house standing there.

The clear winter sky cast warm sunlight over Cecile as she sank down on the ground from shock.

“My back... My back hurts!”

A month later.

Europe’s long winter was finally coming to an end, and people were starting to wear lighter clothes. It was the time of year when the atmosphere was festive, and students and teachers alike were in high spirits as they welcomed the spring holidays.

Cecile staggered into the faculty room at the back of the U-shaped school building, knuckling the small of her back.

An old teacher who’d been around since Cecile was a student chuckled. “You’re looking a little wobbly. Is something wrong? You’re lacking the power of youth!”

Cecile staggered to her seat and plopped down at her desk.

“What’s wrong?” the old teacher asked worriedly.

“It’s nothing. It’s just...”

“What is it?”

“The books are so heavy.”

“Oh, that.” The old teacher suddenly became apprehensive. “Well, uh... I think a young, female teacher is better suited for the job.”

Cecile glared at him resentfully. “They’re really, really heavy.”

“Well, hang in there!”

Cecile grunted.

For the past month, Cecile had gone to St. Marguerite’s Grand Library every morning and evening and carried books to the dollhouse. The student in question, the mysterious Gray Wolf Victorique, never once attempted to

attend class, ordering instead to keep bringing her books. Books, sweets, and luxurious dresses. Victorique's sustenance was clearly different from that of the ordinary folk.

Cecile was getting used to the pitch-black darkness and the horrifying, husky voice. But not the girl. She hardly ever responded when spoken to. Cecile realized that she wasn't purposely ignoring her; she simply did not care about others. She was like a small, wild wolf that would never get used to humans as owners.

Cecile made sure to at least bring her the things she wanted so she would survive.

And just like that, several months passed.

The warm spring season had arrived. Colorful flowers were in full bloom all over the campus, lush and verdant foliage blanketing the trees. The gardens looked very different from during the wintry season.

Cecile had grown accustomed to taking care of the strange little girl, and to the fact that she never spoke to her at all and continued ignoring her. She just silently carried three things to the candy house between breaks. But like the thorn of a small rose stuck in one's palm, she couldn't get her mind off the lonely, terrifying cub.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Cecile never stopped thinking about her.

In the evening, Cecile would return to the modest faculty dormitory standing in an inconspicuous spot, past the academy's chapel. Unlike the school building and dormitories for the children of aristocracy, which were luxurious structures made of rich, high-quality oak, the faculty dormitories were very simple, without any excess decor, just a square building.

There were two dormitories, one for men and one for women, and on the second floor of the men's dormitory was a large family room. Between the two square buildings was a small pond where small migratory birds would come in the spring to rest their cold, weary wings.

Cecile and her coworkers looked forward to feeding the birds, dropping bread crumbs into the pond. A pleasant, relieving ritual that signified the coming of spring.

One night, Cecile returned to her dormitory after a hard day's work, throwing crumbs into the pond as usual, rubbing her aching back, flipping through a women's magazine she was subscribed to, and massaging herself.

Then she started chatting with a friend from her student days who lived in the next room.

“Oh, by the way. I hear Mr. Jenkins, the music teacher, is very sick,” her friend gossiped.

“I see,” Cecile muttered.

Mr. Jenkins was an old music teacher who had been in the academy since Cecile’s student days. He had been hospitalized in Saubreme, Sauvville’s capital, due to health problems.

“If he dies, no one will play that harp anymore,” her friend said sadly.

“Ahuh...” Cecile nodded.

Mr. Jenkins was a skilled harp player and often invited the faculty upstairs to his room on weekend evenings for a lovely tea party.

*Mr. Jenkins’ delicious milk tea and freshly-baked scones...*

Cecile let out a sad sigh.

*Sandwich with salmon and soft cheese. Cherry cake...*

She blushed when she realized what was on her mind.

*Not that. Him playing the harp. Yes, I need to think about that. Scones with lots of black currant jam and clotted cream. No, wait!*

Cecile struggled to get the thought of food out of her head.

“Either way, Mr. Jenkins will no longer be teaching,” her friend added.

“What?”

“I hear we’re going to meet the new music teacher next week. I hope they’re nice.”

This time, Cecile felt truly sad about Mr. Jenkin’s retirement from duty. He was a friendly teacher who patiently taught Cecile, a poor-performing, happy-go-lucky student, the wonders of music and playing piano.

Cecile did not sleep well that night. She got up the next morning as she always did, sadness and worry clouding her face, ate her breakfast, and then headed to St. Marguerite’s Grand Library.

She didn’t know what to choose, so she picked out five thick books at random and carried them with both hands.

Birds were chirping outside. It was a nice season.

Cecile trudged toward the candy house. Just as she was about to open the door, small and reminiscent of shortbread, it burst open from inside.

Cecile yelled in surprise, and so did the students who came from within, children of nobility with blue eyes and blond hair.

The students made no attempt to pick up the books that Cecile had dropped.

“Oh, Teach.”

“What is this place? Why was a dollhouse built here?”

“That’s, uhh...” Cecile stammered as she picked up the books.

“There’s no one inside, just books. A dollhouse without dolls is just plain creepy.”

“There’s no one inside?” Cecile asked.

The students exchanged glances and nodded. Butterflies fluttered in Cecile’s gut.

“All right. Off to class you go,” she said in a deliberately angry tone. “Or you’re going to be late.”

Cecile quickly entered the house and closed the door behind her.

It was quiet.

The shadows swirled. Once again, darkness enveloped Cecile like a black velvet cloth.

A thick, profound darkness that she had supposedly grown accustomed to.

And beyond that darkness, as usual, was the doll-like girl.

Cecile breathed a sigh of relief.

The girl was wearing a luxurious black-and-white dress and a bonnet with layers of floral lace. Her tiny feet were wrapped in leather boots fastened with buttons, and her long hair swirled around her tiny body like molten gold flowing to the floor.

“Oh, you’re here.”

Victorique did not so much as react to Cecile’s voice.

“Students were inside just now. They said no one was around.”

“...”

“I’ll leave the books here. I’ll bring breakfast of tea, half-boiled egg, and cherry salad later. Victorique?”

There was no reply. She simply frowned and stirred a little. Cecile sighed, took one look at her figure, and quietly left the candy house.

A warm spring breeze blew. The sweet aroma of flowers tickled Cecile’s nostrils. As she hurried off, she realized that the little girl had been in the

house all this time, oblivious to the warm spring breeze or the sweet fragrance. The little rose thorn in her chest twitched again. Inclining her head, Cecile scuttled along the garden path.

And then, several mornings later...

The sun was getting warmer and warmer. Spring was giving way to summer.

White butterflies fluttered in the gardens, and flowers bloomed.

When Cecile entered the staff room that morning, rubbing her back, a middle-aged man was just about to be introduced to the faculty. The new music teacher had arrived. A graduate from Sauville's famous music academy, he carried himself with confidence.

Once introductions were done, Cecile hurried out, when the new music teacher called her. He then followed Cecile and started asking questions about Mr. Jenkins.

After much thought, Cecile talked about the old man's harp solo and tea parties.

"Oh... a solo, eh? That sounds wonderful," the new teacher said.

"It was," Cecile agreed. "We've lost a very dear man."

"I see. He sounds like a respectable man." The new teacher nodded.

A strong wind blew. A dry, early-summer wind.

Frowning, Cecile fixed her large round glasses with both hands.

That evening.

Cecile came out of the Grand Library with a lot of books and carried them laboriously to the candy house.

When she opened the door and walked in, she bumped into a student who was just about to leave.

"Ms. Cecile again?"

The student looked curiously at Cecile, who was holding a pile of books. Then she glanced back inside, looking somewhat horrified.

"Oh, I know you," Cecile said.

She was a female student in Cecile's homeroom class. Her bright, blonde hair, reminiscent of straw, was tied into pigtails.

The student's eyes narrowed. "Why are you here again, Teach?"

She seemed to have to come to the house alone today. Cecile was silent, unsure what to say.

“An empty dollhouse with no dolls,” the student said. “A perfect place for a supernatural academy!”

“Uh, actually... Wait, there’s no one around?”

“Nope. It’s completely deserted.” The student yawned loudly, tired of exploring.

She walked out, her little bottom swaying pretentiously from side to side. Cecile set the books down on the cabriole-legged table and scoured the house.

“Victorique!”

She checked the bedroom. Victorique was not in or under the pretty canopied bed. She ran up the spiral staircase and into the dressing room upstairs. She waded through the mounds of white lace, pink ruffles, and black ribbons in search of the little girl.

“Victorique? Where are you?”

As though searching for a small cat, Cecile started looking under the table, in the closet, under the cushion of the rocking chair.

But Victorique was nowhere to be found.

“She’s not here. Where did she go?”

Exhausted, Cecile sat down on a rectangle chest nearby.

The chest creaked.

A soft, annoyed groan came from somewhere.

From under Cecile’s bottom.

Cecile’s large, brown droopy eyes briefly widened in shock. She squinted. “Victorique?”

She quickly lifted her butt off the chest and studied it. Something was peeking out from the edge of the box, which was so small and square that it was hard to imagine a human being fitting inside.

Something white and soft... Disgruntled ruffles peeked out.

Wearing a look of suspicion, Cecile opened the lid of the chest.

Inside was a small, beautiful girl who looked like an expensive porcelain doll, wrapped in frills and lace and cotton ribbons. She was holding a book with a deep scowl. A lollipop stick was protruding out of her glossy, cherry lips.







“V-Victorique!” Cecile exclaimed. “Wh-Wh-What are you doing there? This is a wardrobe box. It’s not your room. Hold on a minute...”

Cecile hesitated to utter the rest. Victorique was curled up and motionless, like a wild animal whose pride had been wounded.

*Were you hiding?*

*Are you afraid of humans?*

That day, Victorique, lips pursed, showed no signs of leaving the chest.

The sun was setting on a particular early-summer day.

“Um, are you free lately?” Cecile, gazing at the white feathers of the migratory birds flapping in the garden pond, asked the huge, old gardener.

“What?” the gardener, a gray-haired old man in overalls, uttered in a thick voice. He was fairly large in size. “A stupid question. Of course not. I tend to this vast garden day in and day out. I’m very busy.”

He was a vulgar fellow, but Cecile had known him since her school days.

Cecile adjusted her round glasses. “I need you to make something for me.”

“Don’t tell me it’s another toy sailboat. You ask me to make all sorts of difficult stuff.”

“No, nothing of the sort. Just a flowerbed.”

“A flowerbed?” The old gardener, holding a pair of huge shears, paused from trimming the hedge. “Where?”

“You know that little candy house that was built recently?”

“Yeah.”

“I want you to build a flowerbed around it. You know, like the hedge mazes common in the gardens of the nobility in the Middle Ages. It goes round and round, and only those who knew the way could get inside. Something like that.”

“A flowerbed maze?!” The gardener rose to his feet. His body, huge as a hill, rocked. “Hmm. That sounds fun. Do I have full creative freedom?”

“Yup!”

“Okay, I’m in.”

Cecile breathed a sigh of relief.

She looked toward the small house. A wind stirred the white flowers. The sun was setting, and darkness was blanketing the garden. It seemed as

though the darkness inside the house had encroached upon the outside world.

From evening to night.

The pale moon was rising in the eastern sky.

Under the skilled hands of the old gardener, a flowerbed maze was steadily built around the dollhouse.

A circular pattern surrounded the little house, growing higher as the days went by, keeping the students' curiosity at bay.

Around the same time, an incident occurred.

Mr. Jenkins' belongings were still in his room in the male faculty's dormitory, located right across the female dormitory where Cecile lived. The room was closed and dark. A bleak room with the strong presence of something.

The harp in that room began playing eerily night after night.

That night, Cecile was in her room polishing her nails and shoes, and, unable to stop, started polishing her friend's shoes as well. Spending a relaxing evening alone, humming to herself, she caught a faint, inviting melody from outside the window.

"Hmm?" Cecile lifted her head and listened carefully.

Nothing. She couldn't hear it anymore, so she resumed polishing shoes while humming.

It sounded again.

"Huh?"

Cecile got up and opened the window.

She looked at the dormitory across the street, at the window upstairs. The lights were off in Mr. Jenkins' old room, and it looked empty. But...

"The harp is playing!"

Cecile shuddered.

She woke up her friend, who was sleeping in the next room. She then put on a coat over her nightwear and ran out with her grumbling friend.

"Mr. Jenkins is back!" Cecile said.

"For real?"

"He's playing the harp!"

"In a dark room?" Her friend laughed. "Sounds like a ghost to me." Then her breath caught, and she exchanged glances with Cecile.

“A ghost...”

“N-No way.”

They shook their heads.

“It can’t be.”

“I agree.”

They entered the men’s dorm, walked up the stairs, and knocked on the door to Mr. Jenkins’ room. But no one answered.

The lights were off.

The harp continued playing.

“Mr. Jenkins?”

“Sir?”

They called for the man together.

Soon people began gathering. The teachers were abuzz. As the harp continued to play, someone went down to the admin room and got the key and handed it to Cecile.

Fearfully, she unlocked the door and opened it.

“Mr. Jenkins...?” she called.

No answer.

The harp stopped playing.

“It wasn’t coming from here,” someone said. “It can’t be. Someone else was playing in a different room.”

Cecile’s friend walked over the soft carpet and turned on the lamp in the middle.

Orange light illuminated the room.

There was no one there.

The moment they all exhaled in unison, Cecile’s friend let out a yelp that sounded like a cat that had its tail stepped on.

“What’s wrong?!” Cecile exclaimed.

Her friend pointed to the harp with a trembling hand.

Cecile squinted, and her breath seized.

The strings of the harp were quivering faintly, as though someone had been sitting there playing until moments ago.

“I-It’s a ghost!” Cecile’s friend screamed. “It’s the ghost of Mr. Jenkins! He was here just now, playing his harp. I’m sure.”

“No way.”

“Everyone loved his solo, so he must’ve wanted to play for us one last time. Oh, no. Sweet Mr. Jenkins must have passed away!”

“I don’t believe it.”

A stir ran among the teachers.

Cecile weaved through the crowd and padded downstairs. Grabbing the phone, she told the operator to connect her to a hospital in Saubreme. She then asked the hospital for Mr. Jenkin’s wife.

“Ah, Cecile. The terrible piano player.”

The woman’s rude remark slipped through Cecile’s ears.

“On behalf of everyone here,” Cecile said between sobs, “please accept our sincere condolences.”

“What?” The woman sounded confused. “Condolences? For what?”

Cecile wiped away her tears. “Huh? I thought Mr. Jenkins was gone.”

“What are you talking about?! He just recovered and is gobbling down food like crazy. How rude!”

“What?!”

Cecile quickly apologized and hung up.

The new music teacher walked in. “What’s wrong?”

“I called the hospital about Mr. Jenkins.”

“The hospital?” There was a note of wonder in his voice.

Work was steadily being done on the flowerbed maze by the old gardener. The next day, Cecile headed to the candy house with a pile of books. She was rubbing her eyes drowsily; the disturbance last night had prevented her from getting enough sleep.

“Oh, no!”

Just when she thought she was lost inside the maze, going around in circles, she arrived at the house in the middle. Cecile, too exhausted to speak, set the stack of books down on the cabriole-legged table.

She heaved a deep sigh. “So heavy!”

Later that night...

In the faculty dormitory, the same thing happened again.

The harp kept playing in the empty room, and when they hurried to the door and opened it, no one was there. The windows were also locked from the inside.

Cecile's friend approached the harp and pointed at it. "The strings are quivering again."

But a call at the hospital revealed that Mr. Jenkin's health was gradually improving.

The following night, the harp played as well. Cecile, the scaredy-cat that she was, eventually found herself unable to sleep.

Several evenings later.

Cecile had brought today's books, placed them on the table as usual, and was about to leave when she was stopped by the Gray Wolf.

"What is wrong?"

Cecile stopped, then turned around curiously. She doubted her ears. The little Gray Wolf had not once spoken to her.

As was always the case, a beautiful doll, trapped in ruffles and laces, lay sprawled deep in the darkness. At some point, the girl had started smoking, and from the white porcelain pipe in her slim hand, a wisp of smoke slithered toward the ceiling.

"D-Did you say something?" Cecile asked shakily.

"Something's been bothering you the past few days."

"How did you know?"

The girl scoffed. "Elementary," she said in a husky voice. "My Wellspring of Wisdom told me so."

"Is that so..."

Victorique's cold green eyes gleamed. Cecile swallowed. The girl, who until now had done nothing but lie on the floor skimming through books with grim eyes, was now giving off a frightening, enigmatic energy, as though possessed by something. The girl had been nothing special. But now, at this moment, she was looking at Cecile as though she was something powerful. Fear and awe paralyzed Cecile.

"W-Wellspring of... Wisdom?"

"Yes. I sometimes gather fragments of chaos from this world and toy with them. Out of boredom. And then reconstruct them to determine the truth. Talk to me."

"T-Talk to you about what?" Cecile's voice was trembling.

"About the incident that's happening near you." Victorique's voice quavered irritatingly. "Speak to me. You will relieve me of this boredom, if

only temporarily. Speak, now!”

Cecile gasped at the sheer disrespect and selfishness coming from the girl’s mouth. She almost tried to say something back, but fear had overpowered her, forcing her mouth shut.

Losing her patience at Cecile’s silence, Victorique sniffed sharply. “Is it something silly perhaps?”

“Huh?”

“For example, you’re craving the touch of the opposite sex. In which case, I will refrain from pressing the issue further.”

“Th-That’s not it!”

Cecile scuttled close to Victorique. And then she found herself telling this strange girl about the harp, complete with gestures.

“So us teachers have been terrified for a while now. My friend said that it was Mr. Jenkins’ ghost, but he’s still alive. What’s going on here?”

“Move the harp,” was all Victorique said.

Cecile came to her senses. “What? Why?”

“...”

Victorique did not speak another word. She buried herself back into the golden darkness made of books, thoughts, and ennui. When she didn’t respond to any of her words, Cecile gave up and quietly left the candy house.

That night.

At Cecile’s insistence, she and her friend unlocked Mr. Jenkins’ room and moved the harp. The harp was a large, heavy instrument with numerous strings stretching from top to bottom. It was very difficult for two weak women to lift it. They only managed to move the harp twenty centimeters across the soft carpet before running out of strength. They gave up and returned to their rooms.

“Is this going to stop it from playing? How?”

“I’m not entirely sure why. But someone suggested it, so I thought we might as well give it a shot.”

They exchanged doubtful looks.

The night wore on.

Never again did the harp sound on its own.



The next morning, the weather was clear and sunny, heralding the beginning of summer.

Summer break was just around the corner. Students of the academy were in high spirits.

Cecile, as always, walked briskly toward the candy house.

She put down the pile of books. "How?" she asked the frilly doll lying on its back in the darkness.

The girl, so small and beautiful that she could easily be mistaken for a doll, yet cold at the same time, had her jewel-like, green eyes open. She would occasionally bring a ceramic pipe to her small mouth and take a drag.

A wisp of white smoke drifted toward the ceiling.

"What are you referring to?"

"The ghost harp. We moved it just a bit like you said and it didn't play last night. How does that even work?"

Victorique yawned wearily. Suddenly she stared at Cecile with wolf-like eyes.

Cecile shuddered. "Um..."

"The man downstairs was playing the harp."

"What?"

"I said it was the man downstairs that was playing the harp."

"...Huh?"

"Do you understand now?"

"Not at all," Cecile replied immediately.

Victorique's eyes widened in surprise, then she sighed. "It's troublesome, but I will verbalize it for you."

"Verbalize?"

"I'm going to explain what I've reconstructed in a way that you can understand." Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth. "Listen close," she began tediously. "A harp was playing in an empty room. It was locked and the lights were off. And when you moved the harp, it stopped playing."

"Yeah."

"You should check the room immediately below. You will find another harp. He played the instrument upstairs by playing the harp on the first floor."

"H-How?"

“The harp is an instrument with numerous vertical strings. Plucking one produces a note. The floor of the room where the harp was located was covered with a soft carpet. The culprit made a number of small holes in the ceiling of the room on the first floor, that is, in the floor of the room upstairs, and connected the strings of both harps one by one. When they played the instrument on the first floor, the strings of the harp on the second floor would also be plucked. Once they finished playing, they could just pull the strings secretly. The soft carpet hid the holes on the floor. It’s one of those old tricks that magicians used on stage. A ghost trick, made to fool kids.” She took a puff of her pipe. Her magnificent golden hair stirred with every little move of her head.

“Who would do that, though?”

“Probably the new music teacher.”

“That guy?!”

“Ahuh. Playing the harp requires a certain amount of skill. Not a lot of people can do it. Besides, you said the first floor of that dormitory was for bachelors.”

“But...”

“He was probably jealous of Mr. Jenkins’ popularity, so he tried to scare the other teachers. Think about it. Who else would think about using Mr. Jenkins’ ghost to cause a commotion?”

“...”

“The only person who doesn’t know Mr. Jenkins is alive is that man.”

Cecile stared at Victorique with a puzzled look on her face.

“Everyone knew that Mr. Jenkins was in a hospital in Saubreme, recovering from an illness,” Victorique said. “Except the new teacher. He probably thought that the previous music teacher died. I believe you said that before the incident, when he asked you about Mr. Jenkins, you replied, ‘We’ve lost a very dear man.’”

Cecile gasped. “I-I did.”

“And when you called the hospital in Saubreme, the man said the word ‘hospital’ with a hint of wonder in his voice. Since he wasn’t aware that Mr. Jenkins was at the hospital, he wondered why you would call a hospital because of a ghost.”

“...”

“Do you understand now?”

Before Cecile could reply, Victorique slowly turned her back on her like a wild animal walking away deep into the forest, and returned to her reading.

The strange force, noble, dark, and awe-inspiring, had disappeared, leaving behind only a doll-like fluffed-up girl. Cecile was dumbfounded when she realized that she was, for the first time, actually engaged in a conversation with Victorique. Still the rose thorns pricked her chest. Wondering what it was, she left the dollhouse quietly.

As Cecile walked through the flowerbed maze, a thought occurred to her: perhaps boredom meant loneliness. She had no idea what the Gray Wolf was thinking, or what would happen to her. The thorns weighed heavy on her mind.

Now summer had arrived.

And the long break had begun.

St. Marguerite Academy was on a break; students had disappeared as though they had never been, and only silence and the brightness of summer filled the school. And there was a small change to Victorique the Gray Wolf's routine.

A deserted garden. In the mornings, Victorique would emerge from her little candy house, ruffles and laces swaying with her every move, and head to the gray, tube-shaped building of St. Marguerite's Grand Library, the largest book repository in Europe. Among the students, only Victorique was given special permission to use the library's hydraulic elevator, which was installed earlier this century. From morning till evening, she spent her time reading books in the mysterious little room at the top of the library's labyrinthine staircase, where the Sauville's past king was said to enjoy the company of his secret mistress.

The seasons passed, nothing happened, and soon it was autumn.

A traveler arrived.

One morning, Cecile was in the faculty room on the first floor of the U-shaped school building, groaning. Before her lay a bundle of papers.

"It's an oriental boy this time, huh..." She fixed her glasses. "What if he's the mysterious type too? Where will I carry things to next? Just when I was finally free from the back pain."

Sighing, Cecile recalled some of the images she had of people from the orient. *Harakiri*, mysterious hairstyles, kimonos with wonderful patterns, eating dogs.

“Right! He should be here soon. I’ve got to hide the dog!”

As she rose to her feet, her elbow slammed against the pile of textbooks, test papers, and difficult books on the side of her desk. Cecile yelped.

“Hmm?”

There was a small, muffled voice mixed in with the sound of the books and papers falling to the floor.

Cecile turned her gaze past the books and handouts and saw a small boy of an unfamiliar skin color. He had dazzling jet-black hair and smooth yellowish skin. He quickly caught some of the falling books with both hands and placed them back on the desk. He then quietly picked up the handouts scattered on the floor.

Cecile gaped at the boy.

To the students of this academy, an educational institution for children of the nobility, teachers were just another group of servants. Not a single student had bothered to pick up anything that she had dropped before. While Cecile studied the boy quizzically, the boy quickly picked up everything, put it back on the desk, patted his knees, and stood up.

He was a small, slim boy. He stood up straight like a grown man and stared at Cecile with a serious and stubborn expression that reminded her of a young soldier.

He had jet-black eyes that seemed to suck you in, and his hair was a glossy black.

Cecile checked the documents on the table. A boy from a country in the Orient studying abroad through a national recommendation. His father was a soldier, and his two older brothers were already professionals. The pride of his country, he was an honor student from a military academy with excellent grades.

“Kazuya Kujou, right?”

“Oui.” A small crease appeared on Kazuya Kujou’s forehead. He wasn’t familiar with French just yet. Then he straightened his back. “My name is Kazuya Kujou. I’m pleased to be under your guidance, Mademoiselle.”

“Do you... want some dog?”

Kazuya’s tense face turned somber. “Non. We don’t eat dogs.”

“That’s good to know. Follow me to the classroom.”

Cecile headed off with books in her hand, and Kazuya quickly followed her. His black leather shoes made rhythmical clicks down the hallway; it sounded like a solitary march.

As Cecile walked down the hallway, she glanced at Kazuya and the documents in her hand. The photo attached to the papers showed a stern-looking military man—his father—two large brothers, and a slim woman who seemed to be his mother, standing in the middle. Kazuya, on the other hand, was at the edge, ducking his head in embarrassment. The spirited girl next to him, his older sister, with glossy black hair and moist eyes reminiscent of a black cat, was clinging to him, squeezing his cheeks.

Comparing Kazuya’s serious expression and his embarrassed look on the photo elicited a chuckle from Cecile.

“Is there something wrong, Mademoiselle?” Kazuya asked curiously.

“It’s nothing. Make sure you study hard.”

“Of course.” Kazuya nodded with a hard look on his face. “I carry the dignity of my country on my shoulders. I must achieve excellent grades and return home as someone who could serve his nation well. It’s what my father and brothers told me.”

“What about your maman and sister?”

Kazuya cast his gaze down briefly; he looked like an actual child.

“Hmm?”

“My mother and sister were crying. They didn’t want me to go somewhere far away.” Kazuya looked tearful. Then he bit his lip and straightened his posture again.

“I-I see,” Cecile replied.

They arrived at the classroom.

Cecile opened the door and introduced the international student Kazuya Kujou. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed boys and girls in the classroom—children of aristocrats who held significant positions in the government of Sauville—all stared at their new classmate, who was standing at the podium, with cold, pretentious, expressionless faces.





Kazuya Kujou's life as an international student was a tough one.

Oriental people were rarely seen in Europe, and the conservative students were very reluctant to have them as schoolmates. Kazuya's earnest nature prevented him from making any friends, and was only barely tolerated because of his excellent grades.

Kazuya's French gradually became better, and he seemed to have no difficulty in conversing and attending classes. He devoted himself solely to his studies.

"Don't push yourself too hard," Cecile would sometimes say. "It's okay to relax once in a while."

To which, Kazuya would reply with a simple, "Yes, Ma'am."

The seasons changed once more.

One morning, Cecile left the dormitory early and was on her way to the school building when she saw Kazuya standing straight in front of the flowerbeds.

"Morning," she greeted.

Kazuya turned, startled. His jet-black eyes narrowed, dazzled by the morning sun.

"Oh, Teach. Good morning."

"You're up early. What were you doing?"

Most of the other students slept until the last minute. The same was true for Cecile.

*Waking up early and going for a walk sounds like something Kujou would do,* Cecile thought.

Kazuya pointed at something with an extremely serious face.

"Hmm?"

It was a flower blooming quietly in a flowerbed. A small, charming, golden flower.

"A flower?" Cecile said.

"Yes." Kazuya nodded.

"Do you like this flower?"

"I do."

"Oh... It's so tiny. I'm surprised you actually noticed it. There are lots and lots of other bigger ones around."

"I know."



Kazuya hung his head bashfully. Then with a mumble of farewell, he turned his back to Cecile and hurried towards the school building.

*Weird kid... Is it really embarrassing to be captivated by a flower?*  
Cecile wondered.

The cool, damp autumn breeze ruffled Cecile's hair.

"Who was that?"

Weekend of the next week.

Cecile, carrying a pile of new dresses and candies to Victorique's special dormitory, stopped in her tracks. She hadn't heard her voice for weeks, and she hadn't seen anything except her face, expressionless as a doll.

"What?" Cecile gasped.

Victorique exhaled sharply. "The one who came to the library today. The yellowish fellow."

"Yellowish fellow?" Cecile mulled it over.

Victorique, on the other hand, was silently smoking her pipe, unwilling to offer any further explanation.

Pages turned at a tremendous speed. She was progressing through the thick philosophy book written in Latin in no time at all.

A moment later, Victorique lifted her head, annoyed. "Moves rather stiffly," she added reluctantly.

Cecile finally realized who she meant. "You mean Kujou?"

She remembered that he had asked Kazuya to find a book for him from the library that evening. With much effort, Kazuya went up the winding stairs, found the book, and went back down. He was out of breath when he returned.

At that time, in the dense conservatory at the top of the library's labyrinthine stairs, Victorique was alone as usual, smoking her pipe and reading books.

"That was Kujou, an international student," Cecile said. "He arrived last month from a small country in the Orient."

"..."

There was no reply from Victorique. She once again lost herself in the quiet world of her books. The soft rustling of pages and the quivering smoke enveloped her.

*I wonder what's gotten into her, Cecile thought. I can't believe she's interested in something other than books.*

She left the special dormitory.

The season had turned from autumn to winter once again. The wintry sky was cold and dry, and the vast garden of St. Marguerite Academy had shed its foliage. Bare trees were black skeletons clawing at the skies. Withered rose branches seemed like sinister spider webs blanketing the entire flowerbeds.

Cecile sometimes saw the international student, Kazuya Kujou, standing before the same flowerbed as before, always early in the morning. As she hurried past, she would glance at him and see him staring at the desolate flowerbed with a soft, oddly gentle expression that he had never shown to anyone, not in class, not when she asked him to run an errand to the library.

The golden flower had bloomed until the end of autumn. Now there was only a bleak flowerbed with dry, thin branches intertwining like spider webs.

Kazuya stood there from time to time, silently staring at the withered twigs.

*Kujou must be waiting for spring to come, Cecile realized one morning. He's waiting for that bright, pretty flower to bloom again. He always looks so serious, but I guess he has a surprising romantic side to him too.*

Gray winter skies blanketed the academy like a dark cloth.

“How old is Kujou?”

One morning.

Cecile, who had hurried through the flowerbed maze to bring breakfast to the special dormitory, glancing at Kazuya on the way, was once again startled when she heard Victorique's husky voice. She almost dropped the silver tray of fruits, rye bread, and lingonberry jam.

“Hmm?”

“Never mind,” Victorique mumbled and turned her back to Cecile.

A wisp of white smoke rose from her pipe. The little girl, puffy in her black velvet and white silk ruffles, flipped through her books, smoked her pipe, and occasionally, as though awakening from a dream, turned her small

head to pick a candy from the pile of sweets and brought it to her glossy, cherry lips.

“You won’t have room for breakfast,” Cecile said.

“...”

“Also, Kujou is the same age as you. You’re in the same class, actually. Though you’ll never meet him since you don’t show up to class.”

“...I see.”

A curt reply. Her voice was the same as always—soft and husky, like an old woman’s. But there was something in that voice that made Cecile feel uneasy, something small, like a drop of rose perfume on a lake.

A drop of sweet nectar onto a vast, dark lagoon.

Cecile stared at the cold face reading the books. There, too, she caught a flicker of something she had never seen before, something that sent her hackles rising. A faint warmth, it seemed. Cecile quickly adjusted her large round glasses to take a closer look, but it had already vanished, quietly.

*What was that just now?*

It bothered Cecile, but since Victorique never said anything else, she left the special dormitory without saying another word, leaving the breakfast tray behind.

A chilly wind blew, and Cecile tugged her brown overcoat closer. After going around through the flowerbed maze, she finally made it outside.

It was even colder outside the flowerbed, in the spacious gardens. Winter in Europe was somewhat ominous and gloomy. Cecile trotted to the school building. Dead leaves rustled.

The season passed slowly.

Kazuya Kujou had caught a cold once throughout the unfamiliar European winter. One day it was so bad that he couldn’t get up, so Cecile went to his room in the boys’ dormitory with a handout of that day’s lesson.

The room was so neat and tidy as to evoke loneliness. Fine oak furniture for the children of nobility. A large study desk, a bookshelf, and an ornate cabinet. In the corner of the room, Kazuya slept on his bed, red-faced and back straight.

The red-haired dorm mother paced the corridor, worried about the sick foreign child. Cecile gently placed her palm on Kazuya’s hot forehead to

check his fever, and he mumbled something in what sounded like his own language, which Cecile did not understand.

Cecile thought he was calling for someone's name. It sounded like "ru" and "ri". As she wondered who it was, Kazuya opened his eyes a little. Jet-black eyes, black as the darkness of night, seemingly able to suck you in. He just stared at her blankly for a while, but when he noticed his homeroom teacher, he quickly tried to get up.

"It's okay. Just lie down," Cecile said.

Kazuya was reluctant at first, but eventually gave in and lay back down.

"I thought you were someone else," he said, embarrassed. "Sorry."

"Who did you mistake me for?"

"I sensed a woman's presence. I thought it was my sister." Kazuya slipped back under the covers. "I thought it was Ruri." A muffled voice came from within. "We were together all the time back home. In our language, my sister's name means a jewel. She cried her eyes out. She didn't want me to go, but I left her behind anyway. I hope she's doing fine."

"I'm sure she feels the same."

"Yeah, I'm sure." Kazuya poked his head out of the covers.

Cecile called the village doctor and had him examine Kazuya. He gave him a big injection in the arm. Kazuya was unfazed; he did not even look in pain. He kept his face hard, clenched his teeth, and tried his best to look fine.

As Cecile and the doctor were leaving the room, the teacher remembered something. "Kujou, do you like sparkly things? You mentioned jewels, and also..." She wore a distant look. "The flower in the flowerbed. Small, but a beautiful golden color. It will bloom again in the spring."

When he didn't answer, Cecile turned around to see what was wrong, and found Kazuya's face red all the way to the ears, and it wasn't just because of the fever. He was stirring restlessly.

"I love the color gold," he said in a small whisper.

Cecile wondered why he was embarrassed.

"If my father and brothers found out I was saying such things, they would strip me naked, tie me up with a rope and hang me from the window. My brothers' favorite book is a magazine called Tough Guys Monthly. But I..." His voice was incredibly faint. "I'm just a plain, unremarkable, boring guy."

“N-No, you’re not.”

“It’s fine. It’s just that when I see something beautiful, I get captivated sometimes. Like someone’s stealing my heart. Not all the time, though. My family and friends don’t know about it, though.”

“...”

“I think gold is a really beautiful and wonderful color. We don’t have flowers of that color in my country. It left a strong impression on me. Please... don’t tell anyone.”

Kazuya’s jet-black eyes closed as he mumbled the last words. The injection seemed to have taken effect. He was breathing softly, back straight even in his current condition.

Cecile sighed in exasperation. She pulled the covers gently over him and gave him a pat.

“A golden... flower!”

As Cecile left the dormitory and strolled through the dark gardens outside, a thought came to her. The girl, golden, like a small rose. Mysterious, quiet eyes that looked straight at you from within the ruffles and laces that bloomed like petals.

Victorique de Blois.

*A living golden flower*, Cecile thought to herself as she walked along the path.

Winter was going to stay for a while.

Soon the gray winter passed and spring came once more.

As usual, Victorique spent her days holed up in the special dormitory and went to the conservatory of the Grand Library during the day. The class’s status quo, too, remained the same.

Kazuya Kujou, an international at St. Marguerite Academy, was having a hard time. His schoolmates had regarded him as a reaper, associating his black hair and black eyes to the story about a traveler who comes in the spring and brings death to the school.

One day, a murder occurred in the village, and Cecile found out that Kazuya somehow got involved in it.

Kazuya was brought to the infirmary, unconscious.

“Wait, Inspector! This is tyranny!”

Cecile trotted after the bold, strange police officer down the first-floor corridor of the school building. A government official was murdered this morning on the village road. The police officer with a weird hairdo was about to arrest Kazuya, who just happened to pass by, and was supposed to be a witness.

Young and handsome, the police inspector had magnificent blonde hair that had been shaped into a drill. He was flanked by his two men, both wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps, holding hands for some reason. A slightly baffling trio.

Cecile bravely defended Kazuya, but the three dragged him into a different room and interrogated him.

*What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?!*

Cecile panicked. She kept pacing down the hallway.

She didn't know how to deal with a murder case. She didn't know how to help Kazuya.

Suddenly, the memory of the bizarre ghost harp incident that happened more than half a year ago came to her.

A strange phenomenon that no one could explain. The sound of a harp echoing ominously every night. And the strange little girl who solved the mystery in the blink of an eye, just by listening to her while she smoked her pipe.

Cecile stood blankly for a while, thinking.

Then she came back to her senses. She rushed to the faculty office and took out today's class handouts. She grabbed two sheets, scribbled down names, and bolted out of the office.

When she entered the room where Kazuya was being interrogated, she put on her best smile and gave the handouts to him.

"Here you go," she said, her legs trembling from fear.

As expected, the inspector snapped.

"You're interfering with our investigation!"

"With all due respect, Inspector," Cecile protested, trying to hide the fact that her hands were shaking. "If you want to arrest him, bring a warrant first. This is abuse of police authority. On behalf of the academy, I protest."

Kazuya thanked Cecile in the hallway.

“No problem,” she replied, and pushed the handouts to him. “Don’t forget this. To the library.”

“Th-The library?”

“Yes.” Cecile nodded.

Kazuya was apparently a little bit peeved that he had to deliver handouts to a classmate in the library. As an earnest honor student, he probably couldn’t care less about someone who stayed in the library without showing up for class at all.

“Top floor of the library tower,” Cecile said. “That child likes heights.”

“I see...” He sounded sad for some reason. Then in a rare, mean-spirited kind of way, he added, “We have a saying in my country about smokes and high places.”

Cecile couldn’t help but chuckle at his pouty face. “Oh, you. Couldn’t be more wrong.” She pushed him gently from behind. “That child is a genius.”

Kazuya, holding a handout in his hand, straightened his back as usual, and walked down the hallway, his leather shoes clicking on the floor. Cecile watched him go with a smile.

Soon after, Kazuya left the school building and ambled toward the gray stone tower that stood quietly at the back of the academy’s wide campus. It was spring, and the little flower in the flowerbed that Kazuya had admired so much was once again showing its pretty, golden buds. A warm breeze blew past. A pleasant season had arrived. It was as if the winter season had never been.

Kazuya’s straight back moved further and further away from the spring garden.

To St. Marguerite’s Grand Library. To the conservatory at the very top of the tower.

A few moments later...

“Being late wasn’t enough, and now you’re skipping classes? You’re free to do what you want, of course, but at least keep your distance. I don’t want to be disturbed.”

“A-Are you Victorique, by any chance?”

Victorique, a little porcelain doll with silky golden hair hanging down from the top of the library, waiting for someone, met a boy who had

travelled from a distant island nation, crossing numerous straits to become her only vassal and friend.

The boy's name was Kazuya Kujou.

The year was 1924.

Sauville. A small country situated in a corner of Europe with a long and grand history, bordered by France, Switzerland and Italy. Tucked away in the deepest, most secret part of the country, at the foot of the Alps, stood St. Marguerite Academy, a prestigious school for the children of aristocracy, which boasted a long history as well, though not as long as the kingdom itself.

Hidden at the back of the campus, at the top of the labyrinthine stairs in the huge gray library tower, was a mysterious place.

"If you are..." Kazuya softly stepped into the tranquil and somewhat magical conservatory. "I brought a handout for you."

Smoking her pipe, Victorique sniffed audibly.

"And who might you be?" she asked.

Kazuya winced at the girl's strange, husky voice. Nervous at the sheer beauty and the odd way she carried herself, he answered in a trembling voice, "My name is Kujou."

Victorique smiled a little. The girl's expressionless face loosened ever so faintly, as if she were enjoying herself. Kazuya failed to notice it.

A warm spring breeze blew through the open skylight. A wisp of white smoke rose from the ceramic pipe. The girl and the boy stared at each other from a distance, one sitting, the other standing.

Spring of 1924.

Thus, the Golden Flower and the Grim Reaper finally found each other.

After their meeting, the truth behind the motorcycle decapitation was revealed, then came the mystery surrounding the mysterious international student Avril Bradley and the purple book on the thirteenth step. The case of the mummified knight. The master thief Ciaran, and an adventurer's secret legacy, the Penny Black. All of which Victorique de Blois and Kazuya Kujou would tackle hand in hand.

But that is a story for another day.



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## **GosickS - Volume 01**

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